Who Accepts the Rewarding but Demanding Job? Parents, Guilt and the Paradox of Ambition[1]

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Abstract

Parental guilt is widely recognized as an intrinsic aspect of parenting for both mothers and fathers, yet its implications for labour market behaviour remain understudied in Europe, where women continue to experience persistent disadvantages in employment and careers. Existing research suggests that guilt may undermine women's labour market engagement, but little is known about how it shapes career aspirations and willingness to pursue demanding professional opportunities. This study addresses this gap by examining whether career-related decision-making, specifically, the propensity to accept a highly rewarding but also highly demanding job, differs between mothers and fathers, and whether parental guilt, understood as feelings of inadequacy or failure associated with the parenting role, acts as a straitjacket or a springboard in career decisions. We test two alternative mechanisms - the Guilt-Mitigation and the Guilt-Compensation mechanisms - using Italy as a case study, a context characterized by low female employment rates and the persistence of the male breadwinner model. Analyses draw on original 2024 survey data (N = 3,845) and examine whether the association between guilt and job acceptance varies by gender, working hours, subjective economic well-being, and parental involvement. The results reveal substantial gender differences, with mothers considerably less likely than fathers to accept demanding job opportunities. At the same time, findings highlight the "paradox of ambition": rather than constraining career choices, guilt mostly motivates greater career engagement, albeit not under all conditions. Overall, the study underscores the importance of emotional dynamics in shaping gendered career behaviour.

Keywords: parental guilt, career aspirations, gender equality, labour market, Italy

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Introduction

This article examines whether attitudes toward career-related decisions - specifically, the propensity to accept a highly rewarding but also highly demanding job - vary between mothers and fathers, and whether parental guilt, understood as the feeling of inadequacy or failure associated with the parenting role, act as a straitjacket or a springboard in career decisions. According to recent Eurostat data (Eurostat, 2025), in 2024 the gender employment gap across the EU was 10 percentage points, indicating that men are, on average, still more likely to be employed than women. The report also confirms the existence of a gender pay gap, by which women's gross hourly earnings were 12.2% lower than men's as of 2022, and a gender gap in working hours, by which women were paid on average for 11% fewer hours per month than men in the same year. Hence, despite some gains in female employment (Eurostat, 2024) and broader advances in gender equality (EIGE, 2024), the fact remains that European women in the 21st century continue to fare worse than men in the labour market: a stark and persistent evidence-based reality.

In parallel, even amid long-term gender convergence in domestic work, women continue to bear primary responsibility for both housework and care activities across the globe (Churchill, Kornrich, & Ruppanner, 2023; Dotti Sani & Treas, 2016; Garcia-Roman & Ophir, 2024; Milkie, Sayer, Nomaguchi, & Yan, 2025). This strongly gendered "second shift" (Hochschild & Machung, 1989), deprives women, and particularly mothers, of time and energy for paid work, resulting in reductions not only in labour force participation, working hours, and wages, but also in workplace authority, prestige, seniority and task quality (Abendroth, Huffman, & Treas, 2014; Abson, Kennell, Haynes, Rowley, & Frew, 2026; Adsera & Querin, 2023; Blau & Kahn, 2017; Jee, Misra, & Murray-Close, 2019; Nylin, Musick, Billingsley, Duvander, & Evertsson, 2021; Schulz & Zoch, 2025; Stojmenovska & England, 2021; Yavorsky, Keister, Qian, & Nau, 2019).

Rising societal expectations around parenting over the past few decades have made the second shift even more demanding. As contemporary ideals of motherhood impose higher standards of physical, psychological, and intellectual dedication to one's children than in the past (Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2003; Schmidt, Décieux, Zartler, & Schnor, 2023) reconciling the demands of paid work with those of caregiving becomes ever more challenging. Indeed, research suggests that the (perceived) inability to meet the contemporary cultural ideals of the "good mother" leads to feelings of maternal guilt, that is, a self-conscious emotion stemming from the perception of having violated parenting norms or obligations, typically triggered by conflicts between caregiving and other roles, in particular in relation to paid employment (Aarntzen, Derks, van Steenbergen, Ryan, & van der Lippe, 2019; Borelli, Nelson-Coffey, River, Birken, & Moss-Racusin, 2017; Borelli, Nelson, River, Birken, & Moss-Racusin, 2017; Guendouzi, 2006; Uysal Irak, Kalkışım, & Yıldırım, 2020).

While previous research has shown that guilt can lead parents to consider reducing their current working hours (Aarntzen et al., 2019) or quitting their jobs (Manna, Procentese, Napoli, & Arcidiacono, 2021), we know far less about whether and how guilt shapes *future* employment decisions, particularly those related to career advancement. On the one hand, parental guilt may act as a straitjacket, discouraging parents from pursuing opportunities such as promotions that offer economic and personal rewards but also require substantial costs in terms of time, energy, and effort (Abson et al., 2026). On the other hand, guilt may function as a springboard,

motivating parents to accept highly rewarding yet demanding jobs as a way to compensate for perceived shortcomings in other aspects of parenting. Moreover, the prevalence of one mechanism over the other may depend on both the parents' current investment in their children as well as their socioeconomic circumstances. Identifying which mechanism operates for specific groups can help explain gender and socioeconomic gaps in career aspirations and intentions, thereby informing more effective social policies and contributing to greater gender and social equality in the labour market.

To address these issues, we draw on data from the *MatGuilt* survey, an original research tool developed in 2024 to study the emotional dimensions of parenthood, in particular guilt, on a sample of mothers and fathers in Italy (N = 3,845). Italy provides a relevant case study due its combination of low female employment rates (ISTAT, 2025b), the continued salience of the male breadwinner mode (Naldini & Saraceno, 2022), limited involvement of fathers in childcare (Cannito, 2019; Dotti Sani, 2021), strong reliance on family for welfare needs (Saraceno & Keck, 2011). Moreover, while traditional gender norms and attitudes have been documented until recently (Lomazzi, 2017), more gender egalitarian ones appear to be emerging (Aassve, Adserà, Bastianelli, & Mencarini, 2025; ESS, 2025). Last but not least, empirical evidence on parental guilt in the Italian context remains extremely limited.

Analytically, we first explore differences in the propensity of accepting a job that is very rewarding (e.g., highly paid, with strong career prospects, and very interesting) but also highly demanding (e.g., entails long working hours, long commutes, frequent travel) between mothers and fathers. Second, building on sociological and psychological theories of intensive parenting (Hays, 1996), gender norms (Eagly & Karau, 2002; West & Zimmerman, 1987). and self-discrepancy and identity (Burke & Stets, 2009; Higgins, 1987), we test whether parental guilt acts as a "straitjacket", preventing parents from accepting this type of job (*Guilt-Mitigation*) or as a "springboard" to compensate for failing to live up to parenthood expectations (*Guilt-Compensation*). Third, we develop moderation hypotheses that identify the circumstances under which the *Guilt-Mitigation* and *Guilt-Compensation* mechanisms are most likely to emerge. We anticipate that *Guilt-Mitigation* will dominate among parents who are already strongly committed to their careers and less involved with their children, while we expect *Guilt-Compensation* to be more evident among parents with lower levels of career investment but who are more present in the daily lives of their offspring. Our results reveal the existence of what we term the *paradox of ambition*: parental guilt can both stimulate and limit the very ambitions it motivates.

Background

Parental guilt and its relation with employment

Parental guilt has been shown to be an intrinsic part of parenting for both mothers and fathers. It can be defined as the unpleasant feeling of being unable to meet contemporary cultural ideals that impose extraordinarily high standards of physical, psychological, and intellectual dedication to one's children (Collins, 2021; Guendouzi, 2006; Li, 2023; Liss, Schiffrin, & Rizzo, 2013; Martínez, Carrasco, Aza, Blanco, & Espinar, 2011). Previous studies have documented parental guilt across a wide range of countries, suggesting that it is a globally shared experience (Aarntzen et al., 2019; Borelli, Nelson, et al., 2017; Li, 2023; Manna et al., 2021; Martínez et al.,

2011; Rúdólfsdóttir & Auðardóttir, 2024). However, cross-national evidence suggests that while maternal guilt is widespread, its intensity varies by institutional and cultural context: Collins (2021), for instance, reports stronger guilt about working and about not meeting employers' expectations in Italy and the United States than in Sweden and Germany. While guilt can stem from various areas of parenting life – from food work practices (Fielding-Singh & Cooper, 2022) to screen time (Wolfers, Nabi, & Walter, 2025) – previous research across a range of national settings shows that guilt is consistently linked to employment and, especially for mothers, can translate into more cautious or constrained career behaviour.

A recurrent theme in the literature is the perceived incompatibility between paid work and motherhood, as employment is often framed as falling short of idealized standards of good mothering (Borelli, Nelson-Coffey, et al., 2017; Hays, 1996; Li, 2023; McDonald, Bradley, & Guthrie, 2005; Sutherland, 2010). As McDonald et al. (2005, p. 64) put it: "The tension between maternal employment and normative concepts of good mothering, especially the importance of constant maternal care-giving, lies in the fact that the majority of paid employment does not accommodate simultaneous full-time child-rearing". Indeed, across Europe and other countries, motherhood is often perceived as a primary life obligation, and mothers experience guilt when working long hours (Rúdólfsdóttir & Auðardóttir, 2024) with such guilt translating into concrete adjustments in labour market participation, including job quitting (Manna et al., 2021) and reductions or reconfigurations of working time (Aarntzen et al., 2019; Calarco, Meanwell, Anderson, & Knopf, 2021). Rubin and Wooten (2007) show how work–family tensions can contribute to labour force exits among highly educated U.S. stay-at-home mothers who report guilt both about time with children and about relinquishing valued careers.

Work conditions and workplace cultures shape work-related maternal guilt. Guilt is higher among mothers working longer hours, particularly in organizational contexts that reinforce traditional gender roles and provide limited support for work–family reconciliation (Aarntzen, van der Lippe, van Steenbergen, & Derks, 2021). The association between long hours and guilt appears especially strong among mothers with more traditional gender attitudes, who report higher guilt than more egalitarian mothers facing similar work demands (Aarntzen, Derks, van Steenbergen, & van der Lippe, 2023). Similar evidence emerges in Spain, where working mothers who endorse traditional maternal-role ideals connected to intensive mothering report elevated guilt (Martínez et al., 2011). Evidence from Australia similarly shows heightened maternal guilt under high work–family conflict and perceived deviation from "ideal mother" standards, while stronger parenting self-efficacy and more supportive gender norms around maternal employment are associated with lower guilt (Maclean, Andrew, & Eivers, 2021). In Turkey, employment-related maternal guilt is also closely tied to work–family conflict and to the availability of emotional supervisory support (Uysal Irak et al., 2020). Recent studies also point to variation in the content of guilt across groups and settings: among Latina working mothers in the US, guilt is often tied to not being constantly present and to unfavourable comparisons with older generations of caregivers, and working from home can ease some of these pressures (Montano, Mizock, Pulido, & Calzada, 2023), whereas rural–urban migrant mothers in China "voiced profound guilt for leaving their children behind" (Li, 2023, p. 1607).

Existing research also suggests that supportive workplace and peer norms can alter how guilt translates into employment behaviour. For example, qualitative studies in specific professional settings further illustrate how

guilt can coexist with the identity rewards of employment, including among teachers in the UK (Guendouzi, 2006) and mothers in academia in Canada (Hillier, 2021). Moreover, guilt does not always operate solely as a constraint: it can also motivate compensatory parenting behaviours, as shown by evidence that guilt can weaken the negative association between work–family conflict and parents' participation in educational and recreational activities with children (Cho & Allen, 2012; Li, 2023).

Finally, research that explicitly compares mothers and fathers consistently finds that guilt and work–family conflict are more pronounced for mothers, and that the employment–guilt link is weaker among fathers (Borelli, Nelson-Coffey, et al., 2017; Borelli, Nelson, et al., 2017; Rúdólfsdóttir & Auðardóttir, 2024). In the United States, mothers of very young children report higher guilt than fathers when working for pay and juggling work and family, and maternal guilt is more strongly amplified by longer hours and work–family conflict, whereas paternal guilt is largely unaffected by work hours (Borelli, Nelson-Coffey, et al., 2017; Borelli, Nelson, et al., 2017). Having said that, fathers are not exempt from feelings of guilt. Recent research has begun to examine fathers' emotional responses to work–family tensions, showing that fathers experience guilt in distinct ways. Qualitative work on long-distance commuter fathers documents how paternal guilt is negotiated and managed through behavioural strategies such as compensation and containment (Sheffer, 2025). Meanwhile, emerging studies of new fathers highlight role conflict and guilt in the transition to parenthood (Barrett & Charlton, 2025).

The Italian Context

Our focus on Italy is motivated by two main considerations: (i) the limited availability of empirical research on parental guilt and (ii) Italy's pronounced gender inequalities in both the labour market and family life. Italy is by historically low female labour force participation rates (ISTAT, 2025b), which are reflected in the persistence of the male breadwinner model within couples. Recent data from Istat show that among Italian couples where the women is between 25 and 49 years old, 48% engage in some version of male breadwinning - considering both single male earner or one-and-a-half earner model (Lewis, 2001) - and the value reaches 53% among couples with two children. Italian women also invest significantly more time in housework and childcare than men throughout the life course (Dotti Sani, 2018; Meggiolaro & Scioni, 2024). Official statistics from the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT, 2025a) allow getting an idea of just how large this gap is: as of 2013, mothers in dual earner couples dedicated twice as much time to unpaid domestic work (including housework and care activities) than fathers (over 5 hours per day as opposed to 2.16). These patterns in paid and unpaid work reflect long-standing structural and cultural constraints on women's employment, particularly after the transition to parenthood. Italy is also a highly religious country with an important role of the Catholic church (Palmisano & Todesco, 2019). According to recent European Social Survey data (ESS, 2025), 78% of Italians report belonging to a religious denomination (against an overall average of 64%), of which 92% declare themselves Roman Catholics. On top, Italians' levels of religiosity are amongst the highest in Western Europa (5.4 on a scale from 0 "Not Religious" to 10 "Very religious", surpassed only by other southern and eastern European countries and with the European average being 4.7). This is relevant because Catholic values have been historically associated with traditional gender norms in family life. However, against this strongly religious

background, gender role attitudes are increasingly egalitarian. For example, 37% of Italian respondents in the 11th round of the European Social Survey were strongly in favour of a legal measure that requires both parents to take equal periods of paid leave to care for their child (vs 27% in the overall sample), and 56% stated that it is very good for family life if equal numbers of women and men are in paid work (vs 40% in the overall sample).

Overall, studying Italy is theoretically informative not only because of its distinctive institutional and cultural features, but also because it represents a broader set of contexts in which growing egalitarian gender norms coexist with weak work–family support. In such settings, tensions between caregiving expectations and career opportunities are likely to be especially pronounced, making parental guilt a particularly salient mechanism in shaping work-related decisions. It is also worth noting that guilt has rarely been the focus of research in the Italian context, with the notable exceptions of Collins (2021) and Manna et al. (2021).

Theory and hypotheses

Against this background, we develop hypotheses on the relationship between gender, guilt, and the propensity to accept a demanding but rewarding job. Breadwinner norms continue to link men's moral worth and parental adequacy to paid work and career success, making employment and career advancement a more socially legitimate and expected domain for fathers than for mothers (Townsend, 2002; Blair-Loy, 2003). As a result, accepting demanding jobs is more likely to be perceived as natural and appropriate for men, even after the transition to parenthood. By contrast, mothers face stronger normative expectations to prioritize caregiving, and career investment is more easily interpreted as conflicting with good motherhood (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012; Sutherland, 2010). Taken together, these patterns lead us to expect that *mothers will have a lower propensity of accepting a demanding but rewarding job compared to fathers.*

As regards the association between parental guilt and the propensity to accept a demanding but rewarding job, we anticipate two alternative mechanisms. In settings where good parenting, and particularly good motherhood, is defined by intensive caregiving and strong moral responsibility for children's well-being (Hays, 1996), demanding career opportunities can be perceived as incompatible with parenting norms. Especially for mothers, guilt may function as an internal regulatory signal, discouraging further investments in paid work that could exacerbate gender role violations (Eagly & Karau, 2002; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Consequently, parents may respond to guilt by avoiding demanding but rewarding job opportunities, or by limiting work-related commitments such as long hours, commuting, or travel. We refer to this response as the *Guilt-Mitigation Mechanism.*

At the same time, parental guilt does not necessarily lead to withdrawal from the work domain. Psychological and sociological theories emphasize that negative self-conscious emotions can elicit compensatory behaviour rather than disengagement. Self-discrepancy theory suggests that when individuals perceive themselves as falling short of internalized standards in one domain, they may seek to restore self-worth by investing more heavily in another salient domain where success is more attainable or socially recognized (Higgins, 1987, 1989). Similarly, identity theory posits that threats to one identity can motivate reinforcement of alternative identities (Burke, 1991; Burke & Stets, 2009). From this perspective, parents who experience guilt about caregiving may

compensate by intensifying their commitment to paid work, where achievement, control, and moral worth can be reaffirmed. Sociological research on breadwinning and work devotion further suggests that career success can be interpreted as a legitimate expression of parental responsibility, particularly through provision and economic security (Blair-Loy, 2005; Blair-Loy & Williams, 2017; Townsend, 2004). In this context, accepting a demanding but rewarding job may allow parents to compensate for perceived shortcomings in caregiving by fulfilling breadwinning or professional ideals and reaffirming their value as responsible adults and parents. We refer to this process as the *Guilt-Compensation Mechanism.* These considerations lead to two competing hypotheses:

H1a Guilt-Mitigation Mechanism: Parents who report higher levels of guilt are less likely to accept a demanding but rewarding job.

H1b Guilt-Compensation Mechanism: Parents who report higher levels of guilt are more likely to accept a demanding but rewarding job.

Importantly, whether guilt operates as a constraint or as a motivator is likely to depend on parents' structural positions and existing levels of career investment. Identity and self-discrepancy theories suggest that compensatory strategies are more feasible when alternative domains for identity reinforcement remain available (Burke, 1991; Higgins, 1987). In particular, the *Guilt-Mitigation* Mechanism should be more likely among parents who are already highly invested in paid work, namely those working long hours and those reporting high subjective economic well-being, for whom additional career demands would further intensify perceived violations of parenting norms. By contrast, the *Guilt-Compensation* Mechanism should be more pronounced among parents with lower levels of career investment, including those working fewer hours and those with lower subjective economic well-being, for whom paid work may represent a viable domain to compensate for perceived shortcomings in parenting. Finally, we expect parental involvement to further differentiate these processes: guilt is more likely to operate as a constraint among parents with lower levels of childcare involvement, while it should function as a motivator among highly involved parents, for whom further increases in caregiving are less feasible. Table 1 summarizes the full set of hypotheses.

[Table 1 here]

Methodology

Data collection and sample

For the analysis we rely on an ad hoc survey carried out in the fall of 2024 on a sample of 6000 respondents. Respondents were recruited through the commercial online panel of the survey agency Ipsos Srl and were invited to participate in an online web survey (CAWI). The interview, which lasted between 17 to 24 minutes, was specifically developed as part of a wider project studying parental guilt in the Italian context. Overall, the data from the project combine detailed attitudinal and behavioural variables, including measure of time use, intensive parenting and concerted cultivation, with measures of parental guilt and shame (full questionnaire available BLINDED FOR REVIEW). Because the main focus of the project was on women, and particularly

on mothers, we oversampled this group. We aimed for a total of 4,500 women and 1,500 men (corresponding to 75% and 25%, respectively). Within these categories, we set specific sub-targets of 3,500 mothers and 1,000 childless women (78% and 22%), and 1,000 fathers and 500 childless men (66% and 33%). These proportions were not intended to mirror the actual demographic composition of parents and non-parents in Italy; rather, they were designed to ensure sufficient representation of the groups most relevant to our research question, namely mothers. Within each subgroup, quotas were applied to approximate the national population distribution in terms of age, region of residence, education, and employment status. To achieve the target size, the survey agency contacted 11,523 panel members: 52.07% completed the interview, 26.51% were out of target, 13.47% interrupted the questionnaire, 1.82% were excluded for low data quality, and 6.13% were deemed ineligible. During fieldwork, the agency implemented controls to detect and prevent automated or fraudulent participation and monitored respondent behaviour to identify inattentive or inconsistent answers.

For the purposes of this research, we restricted the sample to mothers and fathers with at least one child below the age of 18 in the household. After listwise deletion of missing cases on the variables of interest (see below) the analytical sample consists of 2987 mothers and 858 fathers.

Dependent variable

Our dependent variable is built from an original question we designed to capture the propensity to accept a rewarding but demanding job. Respondents were administered a multi-item question asking whether they would accept *a job with a very high income, great career prospects and that is very interesting for them* but that: a) required working evenings and weekends; b) entailed very long working hours; c) required a lot of travelling, sometimes at short notice; d) required a very long commute; e) included working overtime at short notice, and f) required moving to a different city. These items were designed to reflect the demanding time commitments associated with such a job, which may be perceived as conflicting with the ideal of good parenthood (Abson et al., 2026). The responses for the six items were measured on a five-point scale ranging from "Definitely yes" to "Definitely no". Exploratory factor analysis indicated that all items belong to the same factor with factor loadings ranging from 0.61 to 0.75 (Cronbach's alpha = 0.84; Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) Measure of Sampling Adequacy = 0.83 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity p=0.000)[2]. Based on this result, we constructed an additive index ranging from 0 (lowest propensity to accept) to 24 (highest propensity to accept).

Independent variables

The main independent variable used to test hypotheses H1a and H1b is a measure of parental guilt, which is based on a question that we administered in the survey capturing various dimensions of guilt. Specifically, parents were asked the following question: "Parents often feel inadequacy or doubts in relation to childrearing. Below you will find statements describing some of these feelings. Please indicate the extent to which you agree

[2] EFA was carried out also separately by gender and the results were consistent with the ones from the pooled model. The results are available upon request.

or disagree with the following statements". For all items, respondents replied on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The items were presented to respondents in randomized order to reduce potential order effects. The 17 statements that followed covered a wide variety of domains, including guilt related to parental responsibility, experiencing negative emotions, unmet motherhood/fatherhood societal expectations, specific situations that may lead to the manifestation of guilt (e.g., insufficient income, engaging in hobbies), parental shame, and work-life balance guilt. For the purpose of this analyses, we restricted the focus on guilt that could be experienced by all parents, regardless of employment status and partnership status. We also excluded the items on shame, which are beyond the scope of this article. Exploratory factor analysis on the pooled sample indicates that the 10 remaining items belong to the same factor (loadings ranging from to 0.54 to 0.67) and that the scale has good internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.85). We carried out exploratory factor analysis also separately by gender. The results of this operation are consistent with the ones from the pooled model and are reported in Table 2, alongside the full wording of the question and the item list. Finally, to construct our measure of parental guilt all items are summed, producing scores ranging from 0 (low guilt) to 40 (high guilt). In the regression models we included the variable as mean centred the variable to facilitate the interpretation of the coefficients.

[Table 2 here]

To test H2, H3, H4, we include three other variables as possible moderators between guilt and the decision to choose a rewarding but demanding job. For H2, we include current working hours, distinguishing between those who do not work (reference category), those who work less than 35 hours per week (less than a standard full-time), between 35 and 40 hours per week (standard full-time hours, as reference category), and more than 40 hours per week. To test H3, we use a measure of household subjective economic well-being[3] (SEWB from here one) that takes four categories: living comfortably on present income, coping on present income (reference category), finding it difficult on present income, finding it very difficult on present income. Finally, we include a measure of childcare engagement based on four activities: (1) playing with children; (2) participating in cultural activities with children; (3) helping with homework; and (4) taking or picking up children from school, kindergarten, nursery, or day care. Response options ranged from 1 to 6 (daily, several times a week, weekly, a few times a month, rarely, to never) from which we constructed a summative index with higher values indicating more frequent engagement. The variable was then recoded into four categories based on gender-specific quartiles of the distribution (from Q1, lowest engagement, as reference category, to Q4, highest engagement).

Controls

Since other characteristics may influence both the decision to accept the job and levels of parental guilt, and could therefore act as confounders (Morgan & Winship, 2014), we include the following measures as controls:

[3] - The item is also used in international surveys such as the European Social Survey (ESS, 2025).

marital status (living with a partner as reference category vs other living arrangements and unpartnered); age groups (20-30, 31-40, as reference category, and 41-50); number of children (one child as reference, two, and three and more); age of the youngest child (0-5 years old as reference category, 6-10, 11-14 and 15-17); region of residence (North-West as reference category, North-East, Centre, South, Islands); country of origin (born in Italy vs other country); and finally, level of education (lower secondary or less, upper secondary as a reference category, tertiary). Descriptive statistics for all the variables used in the models are presented in Table 3.

[Table 3 here]

Analytical strategy

First, we run Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions on the pooled sample of parents to test our baseline expectation that the propensity to accept a challenging but rewarding job will be higher among fathers than among mothers, both as a bivariate association and including controls. The latter results in the first model specification below (Model 0), where *Y* is the propensity to accept a challenging but rewarding job, *S* is the sex of the parent, and *X* is the vector of control variables discussed above.

$$\text{Model 0: } Y=\alpha_0+\beta_0 S+\gamma X+\varepsilon$$

Second, the baseline specification to test H1a vs H1b estimates the association between the propensity to accept a demanding but rewarding job *Y* and parental guilt *G*, while including the vector of controls *X* and the main variables of interest, that is, *W* for work hours, *I* for subjective economic well-being and *P* for parenting-time involvement. Since we are not interested in testing gender differences in the association between guilt and the propensity to accept a challenging but rewarding job, model 1 is estimated separately for mothers (Model 1M) and fathers (Model 1F), as follows:

$$\text{Model 1M: } Y=\alpha_0+\beta_1 G+\beta_2 W+\beta_3 I+\beta_4 P+\gamma X+\varepsilon \text{ if } S=mothers$$
$$\text{Model 1F: } Y=\alpha_0+\beta_1 G+\beta_2 W+\beta_3 I+\beta_4 P+\gamma X+\varepsilon \text{ if } S=fathers$$

This strategy has the advantage of allowing us to explore possible gender-specific mechanisms in the relationship under study and simplify the third step of the analyses, where we include the interactions between parental guilt (*G*) and the three moderators (*W, I* and *P*) producing six regressions as follows:

$$\text{Model 2M: } Y=\alpha_0+\beta_1 G+\beta_2 W+\beta_3 I+\beta_4 P+\beta_5 (G\times W)+\gamma X+\varepsilon \text{ if } S=Mothers$$
$$\text{Model 3M: } Y=\alpha_0+\beta_1 G+\beta_2 W+\beta_3 I+\beta_4 P+\beta_5 (G\times I)+\gamma X+\varepsilon \text{ if } S=Mothers$$
$$\text{Model 4M: } Y=\alpha_0+\beta_1 G+\beta_2 W+\beta_3 I+\beta_4 P+\beta_5 (G\times P)+\gamma X+\varepsilon \text{ if } S=Mothers$$

$$\text{Model 2F: } Y=\alpha_0+\beta_1 G+\beta_2 W+\beta_3 I+\beta_4 P+\beta_5 (G\times W)+\gamma X+\varepsilon \text{ if } S=Fathers$$

Model 3F: $Y=\alpha_0+\beta_1 G+\beta_2 W+\beta_3 I+\beta_4 P+\beta_5(G\times I)+\gamma X+\varepsilon$ if $S=Fathers$

Model 4F: $Y=\alpha_0+\beta_1 G+\beta_2 W+\beta_3 I+\beta_4 P+\beta_5(G\times P)+\gamma X+\varepsilon$ if $S=Fathers$

To facilitate the interpretation of the interactions, alongside the model coefficients, the results are also presented graphically by means of predicted values (AMEs) of the propensity to accept the rewarding but demanding job by gender and across the different groups of interest. For space limitations, we limit the presentation and discussion to the categories that are most theoretically relevant for our research question. Specifically, for working hours (*W*), we report the results for parents working 34 hours per week or less as opposed to more than 40; for SEWB (*I*), we report predicted values for those doing very poorly vs very well on current household income; and for parenting (*P*) we report the predictions for those spending the least (Q1) and the most (Q4) time with their children.

Results

Step 1: Who is more likely to accept a rewarding but demanding job?

We start our analyses by descriptively showing how the propensity to accept a rewarding but demanding job varies between mothers and fathers. As can be seen from Figure 1, the average propensity to accept a rewarding but demanding job is 9.9 among mothers and 12.96 among fathers (Δ=3.06, p=0.000). The difference, which corresponds to nearly two thirds of a standard deviation, remains statistically significant and basically identical in magnitude when we run the models with the control variables (Model 0, not shown). This sizeable and robust gap suggests that fathers are systematically more willing than mothers to take on demanding career opportunities, pointing to evident gender differences in how parents weigh work benefits against potential family costs.

Step 2: Is there a relationship between guilt and propensity to take a rewarding but demanding job?

The models presented in Tables 4 and 5 test for the association between parental guilt and the propensity to take a rewarding but demanding job[4]. As can be seen, among both mothers (M1M) and fathers (M1F) we find a positive association between guilt and the propensity to accept (β=0.025, p=$\leq$0.05 and β=0.070, p=$\leq$0.01 respectively). These results bring support to the *Guilt-Compensation Mechanism* (H1b), suggesting that on average, parents who feel guilty for not living up to parenting ideals are willing to compensate by putting more effort into their career. This is especially true for fathers.

[Table 4 here]

[Table 5 here]

[4] For space limitations the coefficients for the control variables are not presented in the tables.

Step 3: Exploring the mechanisms behind the association between parental guilt and the propensity to accept a rewarding but demanding job

Finally, we move to the models testing the moderation hypotheses, according to which certain parental characteristics will favour the *Guilt-Mitigation Mechanism* vs the *Guilt-Compensation Mechanism.* Starting from working hours, Figure 2 shows the predicted values of accepting the rewarding but demanding job with 95% confidence intervals for mothers (in blue) and fathers (in red) working 34 hours per week or less as opposed to more than 40. Predicted values are derived from M2M and M2F for mothers and fathers respectively. As can be seen, among parents working less than the standard full-time contract (i.e. less than 35 hours per week, shown in panels a and c, respectively), we find some evidence of the *Guilt-Compensation Mechanism:* higher levels of guilt lead to a higher propensity to accept the rewarding but demanding job. This result is especially evident among fathers, who appear to be more sensitive to the breadwinning norm of having to work a certain number of hours as to be a "good provider". However, the corresponding interaction term coefficients (in M2M and M2F) are not statistically significant, indicating that among both mothers and fathers in this group the propensity to seek a more rewarding job is the same as for the reference category working a standard full-time job. In contrast, among mothers working more than 40 hours per week (panel b), guilt is negatively and significantly associated with the propensity to take a demanding job ($\beta=-0.13$, $p<.05$) thus bringing support to the *Guilt-Mitigation Mechanism*, by which mothers who experience guilt avoid taking on more work responsibilities. Interestingly, the slope among men is flatter (panel d) although the interaction term is still significant with $\beta=-0.13$, $p<.05$, suggesting that for fathers who work long hours, guilt plays a lesser role in career decisions. This points to important gender differences in how guilt influences career choices.

The interaction coefficients in M3M and M3F indicate that the relationship between guilt and the propensity to accept a rewarding but demanding job also varies both by gender and subjective economic well-being. Indeed, as shown in Figure 3, the *Guilt-Mitigation Mechanism* emerges both among mothers with low SEWB (panel a) and among fathers with high SEWB (panel d) with the corresponding interaction coefficients being statistically significant ($\beta=-0.128$, $p<.01$, for mothers, and $\beta=-0.273$, $p<.01$, for fathers). The patterns suggest that guilt may discourage economically constrained mothers from pursuing higher earnings, while leading fathers who already earn enough to refrain from further work commitments. Instead, some indication of the *Guilt-Compensation Mechanism* emerges among mothers with high subjective economic well-being (panel b), as higher guilt is linked to a stronger propensity to pursue rewarding but demanding jobs, possibly suggesting that career investment serves as a form of compensation for perceived shortcomings in motherhood. Finally, among fathers reporting financial strain (panel c), the propensity to accept the job is higher than average regardless of the level of guilt, indicating that this feeling plays no role in career decisions.

Lastly, we test whether the relationship between parental guilt and the propensity to take a rewarding but demanding job varies by frequency of childcare activities. As can be seen in Figure 4 (panels a to d), the *Guilt-Compensation Mechanism* appears to be dominant across all groups, regardless of the frequency of parental engagement with children. If anything, the slopes are especially steep among mothers who spend the most time with their children (panel b) and fathers who spend the least time (panel c). These minor variations hint to gender

differences in the way guilt influences career choices, but should be read with caution as none of the interactions are statistically significant.

Discussion

Three main findings emerge from our study. First, we document a large and robust gender gap in the propensity to accept a demanding but rewarding job, with mothers substantially less willing than fathers to pursue such opportunities. This gap persists net of controls and underscores the continued gendered nature of career ambition among parents, consistent with breadwinner norms and intensive motherhood expectations (Blair-Loy & Williams, 2017; Hays, 1996).

Second, at the average level, parental guilt is positively associated with the propensity to accept demanding career opportunities among both mothers and especially among fathers, supporting the *Guilt-Compensation Mechanism*. This finding challenges the dominant view of guilt as purely constraining and suggests that guilt can motivate compensatory career investment, in line with identity and self-discrepancy theories (Burke & Stets, 2009; Higgins, 1989).

Third, moderation analyses show that guilt operates differently depending on parents' characteristics, with notable differences between mothers and fathers. Among mothers working long hours and among economically constrained ones, guilt is associated with a lower willingness to accept additional work demands, consistent with a *Guilt-Mitigation Mechanism* aimed at protecting already scarce caregiving resources. By contrast, guilt motivates career engagement among mothers with higher economic well-being and plays a qualitatively different role among fathers, whose career choices remain more normatively aligned with parenthood. Overall, these findings suggest that guilt is neither uniformly constraining nor motivating, but a context-dependent mechanism that interacts with gender, time, and resources.

Conclusion

This study contributes to research on work, family, and gender inequality by showing that parental guilt plays a central but ambivalent role in shaping career ambition. By distinguishing between *Guilt-Mitigation* and *Guilt-Compensation* mechanisms, we demonstrate that the same emotional experience can either constrain or stimulate career-related decisions, depending on parents' structural positions and resources. These dynamics help explain what we term the *paradox of ambition*: parental guilt can simultaneously signal commitment and responsibility while also limiting the very ambitions it motivates. At the same time, the findings highlight the persistence of gender inequality. Mothers remain less likely than fathers to accept rewarding but demanding career opportunities. Importantly, guilt more often constrains mothers' choices under conditions of high work demands or limited economic resources, making these groups of mothers even more vulnerable. Even when guilt motivates ambition, this pathway is unequally accessible, reinforcing gendered career trajectories.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the cross-sectional nature of the data prevents causal inference and limits our ability to assess how guilt and career decisions evolve over time. Second, measures rely on self-reported intentions that may differ from real behaviour. Third, while Italy provides a theoretically

informative case, the findings may not fully generalize to contexts with stronger work–family support or different gender norms. Future research should build on this study by using longitudinal data, examining couples jointly, and extending the analysis to comparative contexts. Further work could also explore how other emotions, such as pride or shame, interact with guilt in shaping career decisions.

Overall, recognizing the emotional foundations of ambition is essential for understanding why gender inequalities in career advancement persist and for designing policies that genuinely expand parents', and especially mothers', opportunities to thrive in the workforce and better combine work and family responsibilities.

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Tables and Figures

Table 1. Summary of hypotheses

Hypotheses	Expectation
Main hypotheses	
H1a – *Guilt-Mitigation*	Higher parental guilt → lower likelihood of accepting a demanding but rewarding job.
H1b - *Guilt-Compensation*	Higher parental guilt → higher likelihood of accepting a demanding but rewarding job.
Moderation hypotheses	
H2 - Working hours	Parents with longer working hours → *Guilt-Mitigation* Parents with shorter working hours→ *Guilt-Compensation*
H3 - Subjective economic well-being (SEWB)	Parents with high SEWB→ *Guilt-Mitigation* Parents with low SEWB→ *Guilt-Compensation*
H4 - Parental involvement	Parents involved in childcare → *Guilt-Compensation* Parents not involved in childcare → *Guilt-Mitigation*

Table 2. Parental guilt measurement. Question, items, factor loadings and Cronbach's alpha by gender

Question

Parents often feel inadequacy or doubts in relation to childrearing. Below you will find statements describing some of these feelings. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements.

	Statements	EFA Factor loadings	
		Mothers	Fathers
1	I feel that it is my fault when my child misbehaves.	0.50	0.45
2	I blame myself when something bad happens to my child.	0.56	0.42
3	I feel bad when I am unable to take care of my child myself.	0.45	0.22
4	I worry that I am not exposing my child to enough educational and recreational activities.	0.37	0.37
5	I get worried when I am experiencing unpleasant thoughts in relation to motherhood/fatherhood such as regret, boredom, and despair.	0.46	0.45
6	I feel that I am a bad mother/father when I lose my patience or get angry at my child.	0.55	0.50
7	I feel guilty when I take time for myself, go out with friends, or engage in my hobbies.	0.38	0.52
8	I feel guilty when I do not earn enough money to support my child.	0.44	0.30
9	I worry that I am not a good enough mother/father.	0.58	0.36
10	I feel that I am a bad mother/father when I do not prepare a homecooked meal for my child or when I give my child fast-food.	0.32	0.50
	Alpha	0.85	0.85
	N	2987	858

Table 3. Summary statistics of all variables by gender. Means (SD) and proportions

	Mothers	Fathers
Propensity to accept a rewarding but demanding job	9.90 (5.21)	12.96 (4.93)
Parental guilt scale	22.38 (7.41)	21.45 (7.38)
Age group		
20-30	0.06	0.05
31-40	0.34	0.28
41-50	0.61	0.67
Partnership status		
Living with partner	0.88	0.93
Other	0.12	0.07
Age youngest child		
0-5	0.31	0.35
6-10	0.31	0.33
11-14	0.26	0.22
15-17	0.13	0.10
N° of children		
One	0.46	0.51
Two	0.45	0.43
Three or more	0.10	0.06
Origin		
Native	0.93	0.97
Foreign born	0.07	0.03
Region - macro areas		
North-West	0.28	0.27
North-East	0.18	0.19
Centre	0.20	0.20
South	0.23	0.23
Islands	0.11	0.11
SEWB		
Comfortable on current income	0.05	0.06
Coping on current income	0.45	0.52
Difficult on current income	0.42	0.37
Very difficult on current income	0.08	0.04
Level of education		
≤Lower secondary	0.09	0.07
Upper secondary	0.68	0.74
Tertiary	0.23	0.18
Working hours		
Not employed	0.31	0.05

≤34	0.33	0.11
35-40	0.28	0.53
>40	0.07	0.30
Frequency of parenting activities		
1Q	0.28	0.26
2Q	0.27	0.32
3Q	0.25	0.24
4Q	0.19	0.18
N	*2987*	*858*

Table 4. OLS models predicting the propensity to accept a rewarding but demanding job among mothers. Standard errors in parentheses.

	M1M		M2M		M3M		M4M	
Parental guilt index	0.025	*	0.057	*	0.052	**	0.029	
(mean centred)	(0.013)		(0.023)		(0.019)		(0.024)	
Work hours (ref: 35-40 hours/week)								
Not employed	-1.167	***	-0.316		-1.173	***	-1.168	***
	(0.264)		(0.773)		(0.264)		(0.265)	
≤34	-0.600	*	0.149		-0.618	*	-0.602	*
	(0.242)		(0.750)		(0.242)		(0.243)	
>40	1.517	***	4.471	***	1.514	***	1.503	***
	(0.384)		(1.217)		(0.383)		(0.384)	
SEWB (ref: coping)								
Comfortable	-0.021		-0.036		-0.204		-0.033	
	(0.441)		(0.441)		(1.115)		(0.441)	
Difficult	0.135		0.132		1.092		0.142	
	(0.206)		(0.206)		(0.657)		(0.207)	
Very difficult	0.818	*	0.830	*	3.875	**	0.851	*
	(0.370)		(0.371)		(1.192)		(0.371)	
Frequency of parenting activities (ref: 1st Q)								
2st Q	0.458		0.458		0.473		1.296	
	(0.256)		(0.256)		(0.256)		(0.827)	
3st Q	0.321		0.317		0.326		0.512	
	(0.266)		(0.267)		(0.266)		(0.821)	
4st Q	1.267	***	1.279	***	1.249	***	0.597	
	(0.287)		(0.287)		(0.287)		(0.833)	
Work hours × Parental guilt index								
Not employed			-0.038					
			(0.032)					
≤34			-0.033					
			(0.032)					
>40			-0.130	*				
			(0.051)					
SEWB # Parental guilt index								
Comfortable					0.010			
					(0.050)			
Difficult					-0.043			
					(0.028)			
Very difficult					-0.128	**		
					(0.047)			
Frequency of parenting activities × Parental guilt index								
2st Q							-0.037	
							(0.035)	
3st Q							-0.009	
							(0.035)	
4st Q							0.029	
							(0.035)	
Intercept	8.665	***	8.684	***	8.713	***	8.665	***
	(0.363)		(0.363)		(0.364)		(0.364)	
Number of observations	2987		2987		2987		2987	

*** p<.001**, p<.01, * p<.05

Note: All models include controls for marital status, age group, number of children, age of the youngest child, region of residence, country of origin, and level of education.

Table 5. OLS models predicting the propensity to accept a rewarding but demanding job among fathers. Standard errors in parentheses.

	M1F		M2F		M3F		M4F	
Parental guilt index	0.070	**	0.106	***	0.109	***	0.095	
(mean centred)	(0.023)		(0.030)		(0.032)		(0.050)	
Work hours (ref: 35-40 hours/week)								
Not employed	-0.736		-0.612		-0.745		-0.751	
	(0.780)		(0.789)		(0.778)		(0.782)	
≤34	0.017		0.046		-0.093		-0.013	
	(0.564)		(0.562)		(0.563)		(0.568)	
>40	1.140	**	1.128	**	1.049	**	1.132	*
	(0.383)		(0.382)		(0.383)		(0.384)	
SEWB (ref: coping)								
Comfortable	0.764		0.668		0.446		0.754	
	(0.715)		(0.716)		(0.721)		(0.717)	
Difficult	0.061		0.064		0.023		0.054	
	(0.369)		(0.369)		(0.368)		(0.370)	
Very difficult	1.771	*	1.842	*	1.994	*	1.743	*
	(0.882)		(0.879)		(0.918)		(0.887)	
Frequency of parenting activities (ref: 1st Q)								
2st Q	0.122		0.126		0.091		0.113	
	(0.451)		(0.450)		(0.449)		(0.452)	
3st Q	0.310		0.325		0.276		0.300	
	(0.485)		(0.484)		(0.484)		(0.486)	
4st Q	1.039		1.028		1.022		1.034	
	(0.534)		(0.534)		(0.531)		(0.535)	
Work hours × Parental guilt index								
Not employed			-0.127					
			(0.116)					
≤34			0.039					
			(0.074)					
>40			-0.132	*				
			(0.053)					
SEWB # Parental guilt index								
Comfortable					-0.273	**		
					(0.086)			
Difficult					-0.028			
					(0.050)			
Very difficult					-0.140			
					(0.119)			
Frequency of parenting activities × Parental guilt index								
2st Q							-0.025	
							(0.066)	
3st Q							-0.025	
							(0.066)	
4st Q							-0.046	
							(0.069)	
Intercept	10.472	***	10.698	***	10.536	***	10.485	***
	(0.963)		(0.977)		(0.959)		(0.965)	
Number of observations:	858		858		858		858	

*** p<.001, ** p<.01, * p<.05

Note: All models include controls for marital status, age group, number of children, age of the youngest child, region of residence, country of origin, and level of education.

Figure 1. Density distribution and mean values of the propensity to accept a challenging but a rewarding job among mothers and fathers.

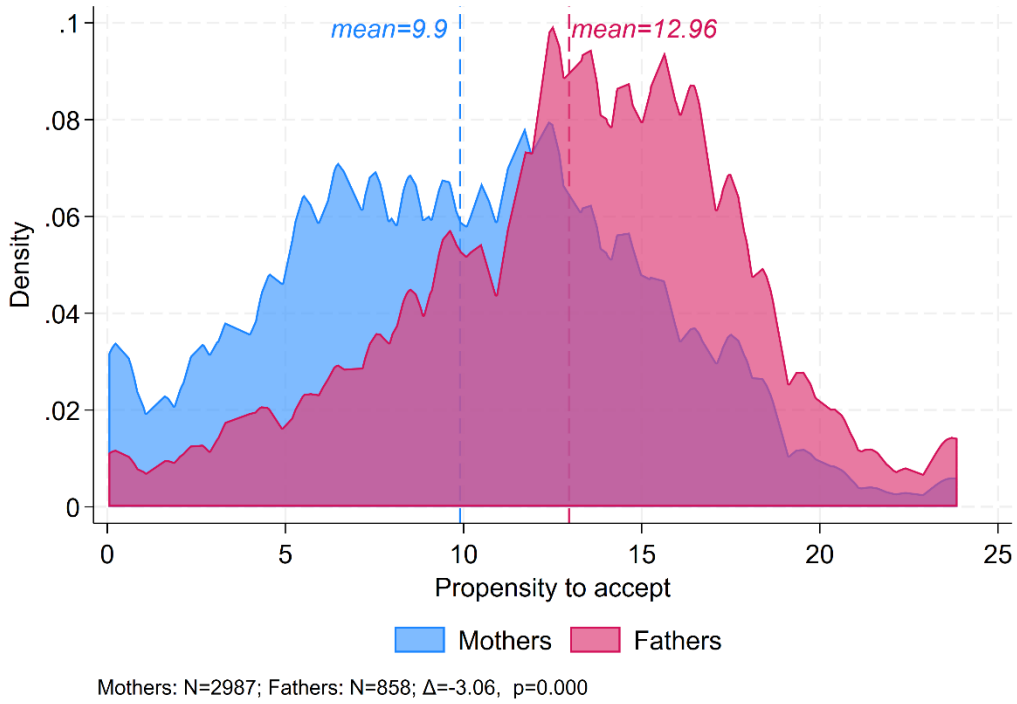

Figure 2. Predicted values and 95% confidence intervals for the propensity to accept a challenging but a rewarding job by level of guilt (mean centred) among mothers and father working less and more than standard full-time hours.

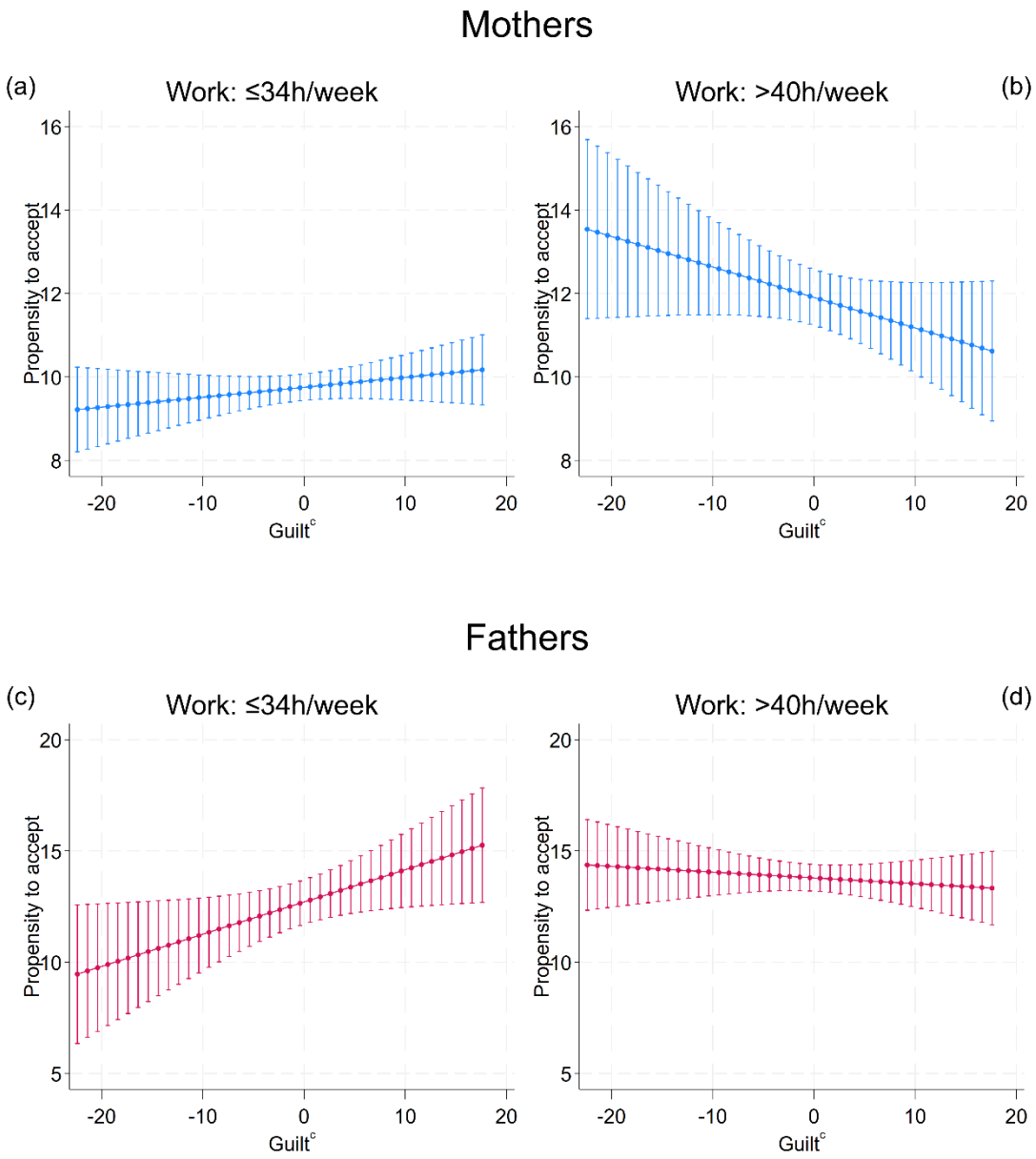

Figure 3. Predicted values and 95% confidence intervals for the propensity to accept a challenging but a rewarding job by level of guilt (mean centred) among mothers and fathers with high and low SEWB.

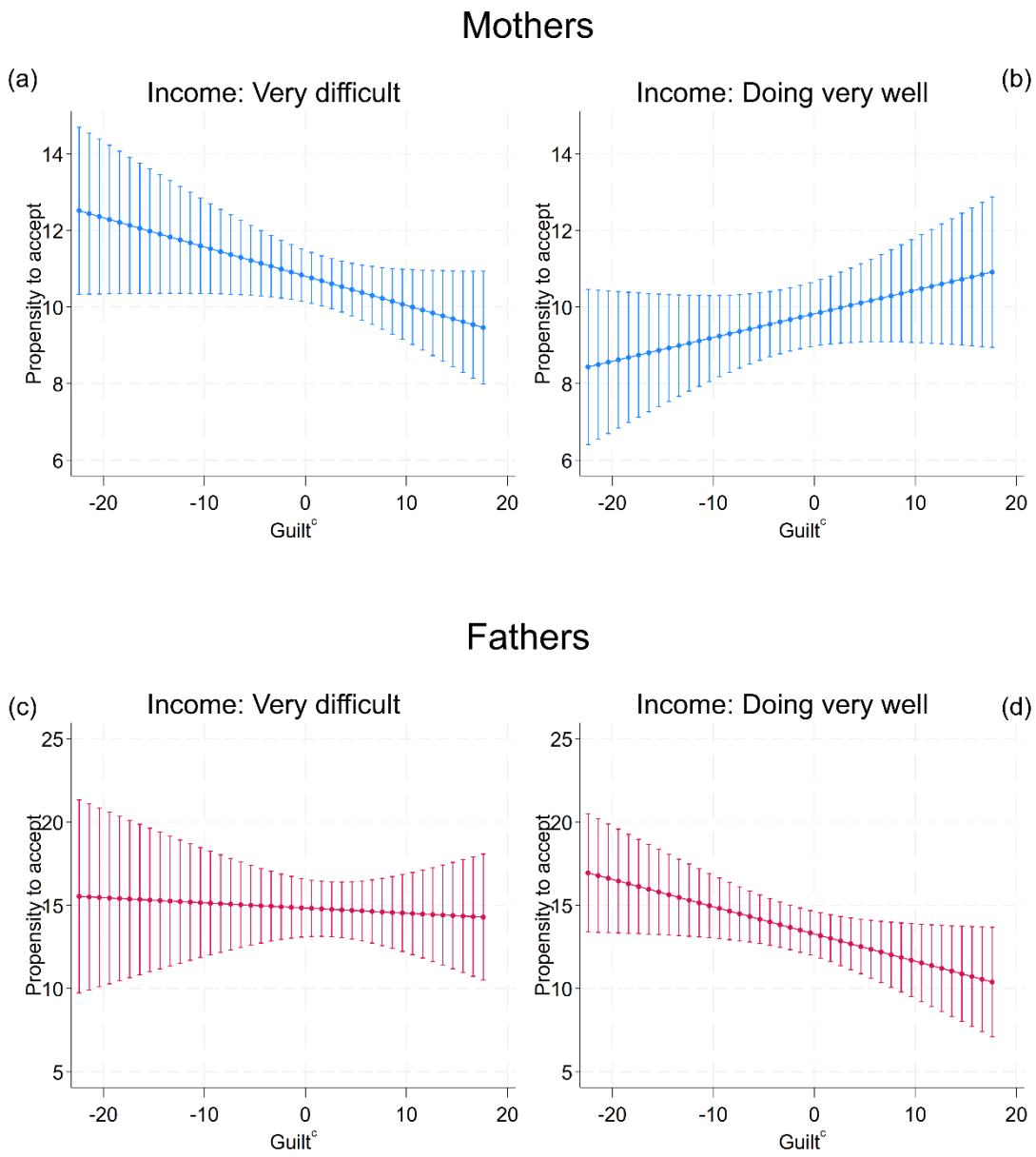

Figure 4. Predicted values and 95% confidence intervals for the propensity to accept a challenging but a rewarding job by level of guilt (mean centred) among mothers and fathers with low (Q1) and high (Q4) frequency of parental childcare activities.