



Retrospective explanation of older women's lifetime work involvement: Individual paths around social norms

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 May 2012

Received in revised form 19 October 2012

Accepted 22 October 2012

Keywords:

Women employment

Social policy

Ageing

Welfare state

Career pattern

Family pattern

ABSTRACT

This paper uses the retrospective questionnaire of the SHARE survey of Europeans aged 50+ to document the career dilemmas faced by women in Europe over the last fifty years. It charts how social transformation was directly experienced by survey respondents: First, it documents career differences of two cohorts in four geographical regions. Second, it compares outcomes faced by career women who had 'gone against the flow' in countries where they were in a minority, with women who had taken the same decision where career was, already, a majority choice. Third, it examines how far individual career choice was affected by the operation of the welfare state. To do that, we employ a multivariate econometric model that treats entry into the labour market and career choice as linked decisions, which are affected by individual circumstances, macroeconomic conditions but also by social policy parameters. We conclude that the same degree of past social policy effort appears to operate differently in different places. This is broadly consistent with the existence of distinct kinds of welfare state in the different parts of Europe.

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1. Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century was a time of rapid social transformation. Nowhere were the changes more radical than in women's participation in society and work. Women increasingly claimed a fuller and more active position in all societal functions. Though all parts of Europe and all social strata were affected, this process was unevenly distributed over time and space and was driven by a variety of influences. Such influences could have been structural changes in production, transformations in the function of the family, values and attitudes in what woman's position *ought to be*. This period of rapid change

corresponds to the lifetime of individuals in the SHARE survey. When today's (50 plus) female population were young girls, the world they were entering was very different from today. These long term social changes correspond to lived experience of women in the SHARE sample. The women in SHARE were witnesses to the foundation, flowering and retrenchment of the Welfare State. According to a hopeful reading of history this period may start with 'Three (or more, but separate) Worlds of Welfare Capitalism' and corresponds to the construction of the 'European Social Model'. Social policy stances towards maternity and family policy as well as labour market institutions were defining fissures between certain forms of the so-called 'European Social Model'. This paper is a first attempt to explore how these factors – labour and social policy transformation – are imprinted in the lives of women in the SHARELIFE sample as reflected in

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micro-data.¹ The data covers the five most important domains of the life course: children, partners, housing, employment and health in a way that is comparable across Europe (Börsch-Supan & Schröder, 2011). Thus the way is opened to approach a number of research questions possibly for the first time.

This paper utilizes the device of examining groups whose characteristics place them in a *minority* in their own country (women going against the flow), yet who are very similar to majorities in other countries in the SHARE sample. Thus family-centred women who have never worked are the exception in Scandinavia, yet are strongly represented in the South. Conversely career women in the South are uncommon, yet are the majority in the North.

These types of comparisons are useful for fixing ideas and for representational purposes. They can also be used to pose complex questions with clarity (approximating in logic to a controlled experiment): given that the kind of obstacles to employment which are held responsible for low labour participation in the South (child care facilities, income support) were patently available in the North, yet the minority chose traditional roles, what were the factors *still* placing obstacles to their participation?

The questions that this comparison motivates are wider: was it limited availability of service infrastructure (e.g. due to location), a question of values, a reflection of ill health or can we discern vestiges of sex discrimination and insufficiency of financial incentives? Conversely, given that the shortcomings of social services are deemed sufficient to explain persistence of traditional roles for the majority in the South, how did career women cope with the pressures of balancing work and family? Did they have fewer children, did they have access to child care from family resources, or were they forced to work by financial pressure? How did women's own (socially conditioned) preferences affect their choices? What are the outcomes of similar choices in contexts characterised by different social norms? Once we try to control for other factors, did social policy lead or follow developments?

In order to be able to disentangle this many separate effects, it is important to employ a carefully structured multivariate model. The last section of the paper approaches these questions by embedding them in a model explaining labour force entry and length of career as linked decisions. This enables us to examine whether social policy parameters had added effects having allowed for the influence of individual characteristics.

¹ This paper uses data from SHARELIFE release 1, as of November 24th 2010 & SHARE release 2.5.0, as of May 24th 2011. The SHARE data collection has been primarily funded by the European Commission through the 5th framework programme (project QLK6-CT-2001-00360 in the thematic programme Quality of Life), through the 6th framework programme (projects SHARE-I3, RII-CT-2006-062193, COMPARE, CIT5-CT-2005-028857, and SHARELIFE, CIT4-CT-2006-028812) and through the 7th framework programme (SHARE-PREP, 211909 and SHARE-LEAP, 227822). Additional funding from the U.S. National Institute on Aging (U01 AG09740-13S2, P01 AG005842, P01 AG08291, P30 AG12815, Y1-AG-4553-01 and OGHA 04-064, IAG BSR06-11, R21 AG025169) as well as from various national sources is gratefully acknowledged (see <http://www.share-project.org> for a full list of funding institutions).

2. Identifying the groups: dominant and atypical patterns

Patterns of female paid work vary hugely in Europe, as do work-care models. Evolving 'models of family' (i.e. the shift away from the male breadwinner model in the direction of dual-earner families – Lewis, 2001) and 'preferences' (home-, work-centred or adaptive – Hakim, 2000, 2004, chap. 1) have been ways of analysing complex trends. At the same time, economists have noticed the existence of two ideal-types which may be rationalized as the result of two equilibria in Europe regarding women's work patterns: a high labour force participation, good social infrastructure and high fertility rates equilibrium characterising Northern countries, and a low participation, low fertility and missing social infrastructure equilibrium characterising Southern economies (Bettio & Villa, 1998; Boeri, 2003; Boeri, Del Boca, & Pissarides, 2005, chap. 1). This brings the welfare state into the discussion as an important influence. Esping-Andersen's welfare state typology (Esping-Andersen, 1990, chap. ix, expanded by Ferrera, 1996 to add the Mediterranean as a distinct type) leads one to expect that patterns of female paid work observe the boundaries of the 'Worlds of Welfare Capitalism'. The exact typology of Esping-Andersen has been questioned in the context of gender (Crompton & Lyonette, 2006; Hobson, 2004; Lewis, Campbell & Huerta, 2008). However, this criticism leaves the geographical division unaffected. The effect of the type of welfare state can be seen indirectly as the underlying cause of inter-country differences, or might be included explicitly through modelling specific areas of intervention of major importance, such as family policies (Ferrera, 2005; Goodin, Headey, Muffels & Dirven, 1999, chap. 1). As Daly (2002) states in reviewing the current state of knowledge, evidence on direct links between policies and particular female labour profiles is still inconclusive (also, Jaumotte, 2003).

The original rise in women's labour force participation took place in times when both dominant gender roles, workplace structures or the family division of labour were not supportive (O'Rand & Henretta, 1999, chaps. 3, 7–9). However, since that time gender roles and expectations have adapted. Hence, the present circumstances of *today's* older people may only be understood by reference to their prior life course (Arber, Davidson & Ginn, 2003). As Morgan and Kunkel (2007, chap. 2) point out, older cohorts of women are more likely to have to depend on survivor benefits, whereas their younger counterparts are more likely to have built up their own social insurance rights.²

The SHARELIFE sample of people aged 50+ includes data on 14,859 women. The majority (85%) had some work experience in the past (one third had just one job during their careers); but at the time of the interview only 23% were still working. Almost 14,000 had been married at

² The shift towards own pensions is often accompanied by an intra-generational redistribution (in actuarial terms) from those who work longer towards the pensions of those who have shorter or no working careers (Timonen, 2008, chap. 5).

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