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Author: Matthias Pollmann-Schult



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What mothers want: The impact of structural and cultural factors on mothers' preferred working hours in Western Europe

Matthias Pollmann-Schult<sup>a</sup>pollmann-schult@wzb.eu

WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Reichpietschufer. 50, 10785 Berlin, Germany

Abstract

This study investigates how social policies, gender norms, and the national working time regime shape mothers' preferred working hours. Using data from the European Social Survey (ESS) for 15 countries across Western Europe, the study reveals that generous public child care and cultural support for gender equality are associated with smaller gaps in the preferred working hours between mothers and childless women. High levels of financial support for families, in contrast, predict larger gaps in preferred working hours. The analysis also indicates that a low prevalence of non-standard work and high levels of work-time flexibility reduce the differences in preferred employment hours between mothers and non-mothers. Individual characteristics such as education, gender ideology, and the partners' socioeconomic status greatly impact women's preferred employment hours; however, they do not modify the effect of motherhood. This study concludes that the impact of parenthood on women's employment hours is highly contingent upon various institutional and cultural factors.

Introduction

After becoming a mother, women often leave the labour market or substantially reduce their employment hours. This negative impact of parenthood on women's employment outcomes is usually regarded as a major driver of labour market inequalities between men and women (England, 2005; Thévenon, 2009). However, the impact of parenthood on women's employment varies greatly between countries, suggesting that mothers' employment is greatly shaped by the national context. For example, in Sweden and Denmark, mothers' employment rate is on par with that of non-mothers, while in Germany mothers' employment rate trails the overall female employment rate by 10 percentage points (OECD, 2012). The major aim of this study is to investigate if, and to what extent, national factors facilitate or limit mothers' labour supply. By examining the impact of children on women's employment, this study addresses a core issue of life course research, namely the interdependence of different life domains (fam-

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