

**Title:** Mothers' labour force attachment in Europe: Evidence from a multi-country survey

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### **Background and objectives**

The labour force participation of mothers has increased in all European countries during the past decades approaching or surpassing the target set as part of the European Union's Lisbon Strategy. Yet, obstacles to the combination of work and family responsibilities still persist resulting in major gender gaps. In particular, the literature has pointed to major gender pay gaps in some countries as a result of women's labour force withdrawal after childbirth and/or discontinuous employment patterns (Sigle-Rushton and Waldfogel 2007). The reasons for women's discontinued employment trajectories are complex involving their education level (Konietza and Kreyenfeld 2010), job conditions (Houston and Marks 2003), perceived work-life conflict (McGinnity and Whelan 2009), values (Steiber and Haas 2009), and policies (Pronzato 2009; Misra et al. 2011). Still, and despite this large literature, we do not fully understand why the labour force participation of mother continues to be relatively low in some countries, and especially why some women appear to be more willing or able to combine work and family responsibilities than others.

In this paper, we therefore aim at contributing to the literature on work-family strategies by examining the intention of mothers to enter or to exit the labour market used here as a proxy for mothers' labour force attachment. In particular, and drawing from data from the Generation and Gender Survey, we focus on four subgroups of mothers: those employed, those currently on maternity or parental leave, those unemployed, and stay-at-home mothers. Our objective is to better understand the factors that appear to help or constraint mothers in their employment decision. Building from a socio-ecological model, we examine the role of (1) micro-level factors such as the mothers' education level, health, work experience and work/family preference; (2) meso-level factors such as spousal and family support and work conditions; and (3) macro-level factors such as leave and childcare policies. The result is a more comprehensive picture of the forces that drive mothers to remain or to exit the labour market.

### **Data and methods**

In the first part of the paper, we confine the analysis to wave 1 of the Generation and Gender surveys. We use as dependent variable the question on work intention asked to four different subgroups of mothers:

- Currently employed: "Do you intend to give up paid work within the next three years?"
- Currently on maternity or parental leave: "Do you intend to resume work after the end of your maternity or parental leave?"
- Currently stay-at-home mothers (homemakers): "Do you intend to take up a job within the next three years?"

- Currently unemployed: “Do you intend to take a job or start a business within the next three years?”

Possible answers to these questions were: Definitely not, Probably not, Probably yes, and Definitely yes.<sup>1</sup> We furthermore restrict our sample to mothers with at least one child less than 12 years old at home in order to capture mothers with major family responsibilities.

As of now, GGP data are available from five Western European countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, and Norway) and five Eastern European countries (Bulgaria, Georgia, Hungary, Romania, and Russia).<sup>2</sup> In the months ahead, data from other countries including Italy are also expected. And while these countries do not cover the full spectrum of European countries, they include countries with very different levels of female employment, different welfare state traditions, and different levels of economic development.

In the second part of the paper, we then use data from Waves 1 and 2 for selected countries in order to capture both work intention (at wave 1) and actual behaviour (at wave 2). This longitudinal analysis is likely the most interesting in allowing us to examine the factors that prevent or facilitate the realization of intentions. Right now, data for Wave 2 are available only for a small number of countries. Data from a larger number of countries are however expected in the months ahead.

### **Preliminary results**

Preliminary results reveal both cross-national similarities and differences in mothers’ employment intention. In particular we find:

- For mothers who are currently employed, the very large majority of them (around 90 percent) said that they had no intention to give up paid work within the next three years. What this suggests is that these mothers have managed to combine work and family responsibilities in a satisfactory matter and therefore feel strongly attached to the labour market. This is obviously a selected group of mothers as those who have not managed to find a satisfactory work-family balance have already withdrawn from the labour market. What will be particularly interesting to see is whether by wave 2 these women are still in the labour market or if instead some factors have driven them out of it.
- For mothers who are currently on maternity or parental leave, we found that the large majority intend to resume work after the end of their leave. However a non-negligible 10 to 20 percent of mothers said that they were definitively not or probably not intending to resume work. It will be particularly interesting to examine the factors that contribute to the intention to resume or not work. Among the covariates of interest, we will examine the role of education, health and work/family preference. We should however note that this subgroup of mothers is very specific and therefore translates into very small numbers in

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<sup>1</sup> The exception is Hungary and Norway for which the answers were yes or no.

<sup>2</sup> GGP surveys from Estonia and the Netherlands are also available but do not contain data on work intention.

some countries. In countries where the maternity/ parental leave is longer, we however have relatively large numbers and this is where multivariate analyses will be possible.

- For stay-at-home mothers (homemakers), we found very heterogeneous results with about half saying that they were intending to take up a job within the next three years and the other half not. Our aim here is to examine micro-level factors (such as number and age of children) but also macro-level factors (such as childcare policies) in order to understand women's decision to remain at home when their children are young.
- For unemployed mothers, the situation is also heterogeneous but the majority say that they intend to take up a job or start a business within the next three years. Mothers who are unemployed obviously form a distinct group, but we include them in our analysis to contrast them to stay-at-home mothers.

### **Policy implications**

In the context of low fertility levels, discussions about future labour force shortages are frequent in policy circles. The need to retain older workers in the labour force and to encourage more women to enter and to remain in the labour force are therefore important political issues. Results from this paper are expected to provide empirical evidence that will help better understand the factors that contribute to the labour force attachment of mothers including work conditions and family policies.

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