

Title: **The labour market intention and behaviour of stay-at-home mothers in Europe and Australia**

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Background and objectives

The labour force participation of women has increased in all European countries during the past decades approaching or even surpassing the target set as part of the European Union's Lisbon Strategy. Despite this increase, the employment trajectories of a large proportion of women continue to be characterized by major discontinuities, especially in childbearing years, resulting in major gender pay gaps (Sigle-Rushton and Waldfogel 2007). What we know from the literature is that the reasons for these employment discontinuities are complex involving women's 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, Budig, Boeckmann 2011). Still, and despite this large literature, we do not fully understand why the labour force trajectories of women continue to be so heterogeneous both within- and between-countries, and especially why some women interrupt their employment for short periods of time and others for longer.

In this paper, we focus on the case of stay-at-home mothers: a particularly interesting group to study in view of the fact that they have already demonstrated a weaker attachment to the labour market (by becoming homemakers) and because they are precisely the group of mothers targeted by governments in their attempt to increase female labour force participation. But instead of "simply" predicting whether a mother is participating or not in the labour market, our analysis adopts a dynamic perspective by examining the intention of stay-at-home mothers to join or not to the labour market in the foreseeable future (in the next three years) and whether or not these intentions are realized three years later. In doing so, our aim is to identify the individual- and country-level characteristics most strongly associated with the intention of stay-at-home mothers to remain temporary or more permanently at home, as well as the determinants of actually returning to the labour market.

In terms of individual-level characteristics, our analysis pays a particular attention to the role of education in explaining the labour market intention and behaviour of stay-at-home mothers. We examine two conflicting explanations. On the one hand, the human capital perspective posits that less educated mothers will be more likely to withdraw from the labour market than their highly educated counterparts because of their lower work attachment and their lower opportunity cost (van der Lippe and van Dijk 2002). This theory moreover predicts that the likelihood of mothers to return to the labour market will decrease the longer they actually stay out of the labour market, and that longer absences from the labour market will be more prevalent among the less educated mothers. On the other hand, the preference theory posits that women differ in the subjective value they attach to their career and motherhood, and that these value can operate independently from mothers' level of education (Hakim 2003). The particular case of highly educated mothers withdrawing from the labour market for the sake of their children has in fact attracted much attention in some countries in recent years (e.g. Belkin 2003). Coined the 'opting out revolution', the withdrawal from the labour market of this group of mothers has revealed the large ambivalence and highly emotional character of the decision to remain or not in the labour market (Stone and Lovejoy 2004; Rubin

and Wooten 2007). And while preference theory has been subjected to various criticisms (e.g. Procter and Padfield 1999; McRae 2003), other studies have found evidence of the impact of traditional gender role values on the probability of women's employment (Fortin 2005).

In terms of country-level characteristics, our analysis focuses on the role of work-family reconciliation measures as determinants of the intention and behaviour of stay-at-home mothers. In particular, and in line with Preference Theory, it could be that some mothers have a strong preference for being at home with their children but that external circumstances (including governmental support) makes this preference more, or less, possible to realize. By adopting a cross-national perspective, our aim is moreover to see whether specific determinants, such as education, operate similarly or dissimilarly across countries belonging to different welfare and gender regimes. For while recent analyses have highlighted the role of both individual- and country-level determinants of female employment, they were done in a static framework and only examined a very restricted set of determinants (Nieuwenhuis, Need, Van der Kolk 2012).

Data and methods

In the first part of the paper, we use data from wave 1 of the Generations and Gender Surveys to examine the labour market intention of stay-at-home mothers and their related determinants. We use as dependent variable the question on work intention phrased as: "Do you intend to take up a job within the next three years?". Possible answers to this question were: Definitely not, Probably not, Probably yes, and Definitely yes.¹ This question was asked to mothers who declared themselves to be homemakers and who were not temporarily absent of the labour market because of being on maternity or parental leave. As of now, GGP data including this question are available from five Western European countries (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, and Italy), seven Eastern European countries (Bulgaria, Georgia, Hungary, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Russia), as well as Australia.² 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 Bulgaria, France, Germany and Georgia. Data for Australia, Austria, Hungary and Lithuania will be available shortly.

For the analysis, we 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. In line with the previous literature, we include a number of individual-level economic and socio-demographic characteristics. To measure one's level of family responsibilities, we include the number of children under 15 living in the household, the presence of a young child (under the age of five), and whether or not the mother is partnered (married or cohabiting as opposed to being a single-parent). To measure one's level of human capital and potential opportunity cost, we include the mother's level of education where we contrast those with a high level of education (ISEC 5 or 6)

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

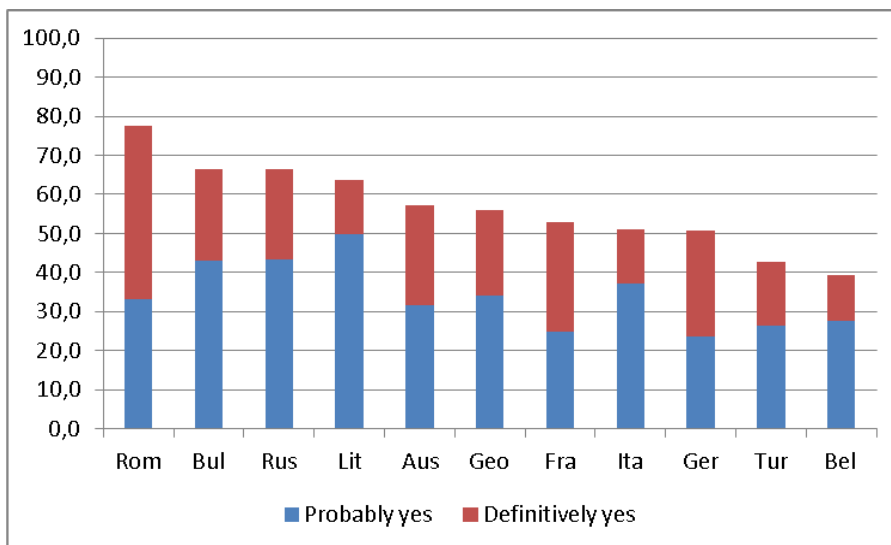
² GGP surveys from Estonia and the Netherlands are also available but do not contain data on work intention. The question on work intention was asked in Norway but the subsample of homemakers is too small for analysis.

with those with a lower level. Women’s views about gender roles and their underlying level of conservatism are measured by mothers’ answer to the statement “A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works” coded “1” if strongly agree up to “5” if strongly disagree. As such, a high value on this item indicates a non-traditional view. Finally, a family’s financial needs is captured by mothers’ answer to the question “Thinking of your household’s total monthly income, is your household able to make ends meet ... “ where we contrast those answering fairly easily, easily, and very easily (coded ‘1’) to those answering with great difficulty, with difficulty, or with some difficulty (coded ‘0’).

Preliminary results

Preliminary results reveal that about half of the stay-at-home mothers said that they were intending to take up a job within the next three years with very large cross-national differences ranging from close to 80 percent in Romania to less 40 percent in Belgium (Figure 1). Preliminary logistic regression analyses furthermore revealed that having held a job before is the key determinant of mother’s intention to take up a paid job in the next three years. Across the different countries, having held a job before increases by a factor of two or even more the odds of intending to take up a job. Thus for women who held a job before, their homemaker status is likely a temporary situation although one that has been keeping them out of the labour force for a relatively long period of time (on average for 6 or 7 years). Holding a non-traditional view about gender roles and having a higher level of education were also found to increase the odds of intending to take up a paid job. Surprisingly, the number and age of the children did not have a statistically significant impact on the intention to take up a job once we control for other individual characteristics.

Figure 1: Intention to take up a job within the next three years among homemakers (percent)



Source: GGP data (own calculation), where “Tur” refers to the Turkish subsample in Germany.

Our next steps for this paper is (1) to update our analysis of work intentions to additional GGP countries for which the data have recently been made available and to better model the linkages between individual- and country-level characteristics; and (2) to analyse the realization (or not) of these intentions three years later by using data from wave 2 for selected countries.

Policy implications

In the context of low fertility levels, discussions about future labour force shortages are frequent in policy circles. The need to retain 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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