

Dual-Earner Couples with Children: Exploring the Relationship Between the Parents' Working Hours in the Context of Norwegian Work-Family Policy.

Abstract

A more equal sharing of paid and unpaid labor between mothers and fathers has been an important objective in Norwegian work-family policy for decades. Mothers' participation in the labor force has increased substantially and more fathers share the parental leave and childcare with the mother. In this paper we will examine the relationship between the parents' working hours by following couples with children over time. Using a nationally representative panel survey conducted by Statistics Norway 1997-2002 our findings indicate that the mother adjusts her working hours to the age of the youngest child, while the father slightly adjusts his working hours to the mother's. Despite numerous government incentives and reforms to facilitate gender equality, it seems that the more equal sharing of labor observed at an aggregate level masks a more traditional division still present among couples with children.

Extended Abstract

A more equal sharing of paid and unpaid labor between mothers and fathers has been an important objective in Norwegian work-family policy for decades. It has been a goal to facilitate the labor participation of mothers and more recently also increase the fathers' involvement in child-care and housework. Incentives such as extended parental leave, introduction of the father quota, flexible working hours and more subsidized preschools have proven successful. Mothers' participation in the labor force has increased substantially and more fathers share the parental leave and childcare with the mother.

However, research shows that most part-time employed in Norway are women. While more women are employed, many still work reduced hours. And while fathers in general work slightly less than before, many often work long hours. Despite numerous gender neutral government incentives and reforms encouraging flexibility both at home and at the working place, mothers and fathers still seem to differ in their labor force participation.

In Norway, most quantitative studies on parents' working hours are cross-sectional and only a few look at the relationship between the working hours of mothers and fathers within the same couple. In this paper we wish to contribute to the current discussion on gender equality in Norway by presenting the first Norwegian quantitative study on the working behavior of parents within the same couple over time. We know little about the relationship between parents' working hours in a society that has politically encouraged gender equality both at work and at home for several decades. Does a change in one parent's working hours entail a change in the others? Are the parents' working hours interdependent and reciprocal? Do they change in opposite directions? To which degree do the parents adjust their working hours to the age of the youngest child? Observing couples over time may shed new light on how parents in Norway adjust their working hours in relation to each other, and how they change their working hours as the youngest child grows older.

The analysis is based on a nationally representative panel survey conducted annually between 1997 and 2002 by Statistics Norway. The telephone survey includes questions on the mother's and the father's normal weekly working hours, in addition to register information about the age of the youngest child. A final sample of 1088 married or cohabiting dual-earner couples with children 1-15 years of age are used in this analysis. We exclude couples whose youngest child is less than one year old since these couples are extensive users of parental leave benefits and thus do not report normal working hours. By the time the child has reached one, most parents with a prior labor force attachment are back to work while the child is attending preschool. In this study we are interested in following the working hours of those who are employed and therefore exclude couples where at least one parent does not work.

The dependent variable is the mother's or the father's weekly working hours. Using a fixed effects regression model we regress the partner's working hours and the age of the youngest child on the dependent variable. We run separate models for the mother and the father. Time is measured as a one-year annual increase in the age of the youngest child.

The descriptive analysis presented in this paper indicates that fathers work on average much more than mothers but that there is considerable variation within mothers and fathers working hours over time. We also find that many parents change their working hours from one year to the next, but that the partner's hours often remain stable. In relatively few couples do the parents change their working hours in opposite directions, and when they do it cements the existing pattern of mothers working part-time, and fathers much more.

The results from the fixed-effects regression analysis indicate that the father is more responsive to a change in his partner's working hours than is the mother. However, the coefficients of change are so small that they can hardly be regarded as a compensation for an increase in the mother's working hours. It seems that the father in general is not much affected by a change in the mother's working hours or the ageing of the youngest child. In fact, he seems to further strengthen his work-commitment by working more when the youngest child is two years old. It seems that the father takes on the role as family provider rather than family caregiver.

The mother on the other hand, works on average much less, particularly when the youngest child is under 5 years old. It is the age of the child that determines her working hours, not an increase in the partner's hourly connection to his work. This does not necessarily mean that an increase in his absence away from home does not have an impact on the mother's decision to, on average, work part-time. The fathers on average work much more than the partner and an even further increase in his working hours may make no difference for the mother

It seems that the more equal sharing of labor observed at an aggregate level masks a traditional division still present among couples with children. This is particularly surprising considering the extensive reforms that were introduced to reduce the gender gap between parents both at home and at the working place. However, our findings are in line with those cross sectional studies that suggest that men and women with children continue to differ in their labor force participation. We suggest that this may partly be due to the fathers still not finding complete acceptance at the working place for reduced working hours during the years of child rearing, in addition to the more controversial view that many mothers during times of economic prosperity and a whole range of flexible work-family options may prefer reduced working hours.