The gendered division of paid labour around parenthood among native and migrant origin couples

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1. State-of-the-art

Although maternal employment has increased notably in many European countries, women continue to face stronger child-related labour market penalties than their male partners (Kuhhirt, 2011; Schober, 2011). Numerous studies have shown that the transition to parenthood encourages gender inequality by producing and strengthening a gendered division of housework and childcare as well as paid work (Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes, 2008; Grunow, Schulz, & Blossfeld, 2012). However, while cross-sectional studies indicate that the employment gap between men and women is larger among migrants than natives, and particularly when they have children (FOD WASO & UNIA, 2017; Rubin et al., 2008), the degree to which the gendered division of paid work around the transition to parenthood varies between native and migrant origin couples is hitherto rarely considered longitudinally.

A review of the literature indicates that the persistence of gender inequalities in couples' divisions of paid work, particularly around the transition to parenthood, has been related to two strands of explanations. On the one hand, micro-economic (Becker, 1991) and bargaining theories (Lundberg & Pollak, 1996) suggest that couples divide paid work in the most efficient manner. In this view, the partner whose pre-birth labour force position yields higher wages, higher security, or does not allow for a reduction in working hours will take up more paid work whereas the other partner will invest more time in household work and childcare, regardless of gender. In contrast, symbolic interactionistic perspectives argue that men and women conform to and reproduce societal gender norms (Brines, 1993; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Especially after the transition to parenthood couples are assumed to conform to gendered parenting norms (e.g. male breadwinner, female caregiver), even if these divisions of paid work do not maximise couples' joint economic resources. Whereas the occurrence of more traditional gender dynamics in migrant origin couples compared to native couples can according to the first perspective be explained by stronger labour market positions for men than for women, symbolic interactionistic perspectives assume that differential gender dynamics in paid work around parenthood are due to variation in gender norms, the extent to which couples conform to and reproduce specific gender norms and the social penalties in case of deviation from these norms.

In line with micro-economic and bargaining theories, prior longitudinal research among native dual-earner couples in Belgium shows that pre-birth relative earnings affect the magnitude of gender penalties associated with parenthood: a female main earner constellation relates positively to egalitarian and female-oriented employment strategies (Wood, Kil, & Marynissen, 2018). Male-oriented parental employment strategies continue, however, to occur most - even among female main earner couples - suggesting that also cultural and structural factors limit parents to opt for an egalitarian employment division. Although literature has long asserted that the persistence of traditional gender roles and gendered institutional setups potentially 'discount' women's bargaining power connected to relative pre-birth socio-economic positions (Blumberg, 1984), it is unclear whether migration background moderates the effect of pre-birth labour market positions on the gendered division of paid labour following childbearing. In order to fill this gap in knowledge, this study investigates of the impact of women's pre-birth relative wages on the change in their relative work percentage in the household around the transition to parenthood, with particular attention to differential mechanisms among native and migrant origin couples.

2. Data & Methods

2.1 Data

We use data from the Belgian Administrative Socio-Demographic Panel (Belgian ASD Panel), linking longitudinal microdata from the National Register to the Crossroads Bank of Social Security. The data infrastructure provides information on a sample of women aged 15-50 years legally residing in Belgium on January 1st 1999. Sampled women are subsequently followed until i) the age of 65, ii) emigration/death, or iii) the end of the observation period on December 31st 2010. To maintain cross-sectional representativeness, supplementary annual samples were drawn of 15-year-olds, as well as women aged 16–50 years who settled in Belgium in the preceding year. For each observation year, household members of sampled women on the first of January are also included in the data.

The analysis investigates the change in women's relative work intensity in the household around the birth of the first child among couples i) who have their first child between the first quarter of 2000 and the third quarter of 2010, and ii) where both partners are employed and have a known work intensity[1]. In our dataset, work intensity reflects the percentage of the standard number of work hours in a full-time contract in the employment sector considered. We follow couples from one year before the birth of their first child until i) two quarters before their second child is born[2], ii) the first child reaches the age of six, or iii) censoring as a result of death, emigration or the end of the observation period. Couples are stratified by migration background[3] and we distinguish migrant origin couples (i.e. couples where one or both partners has a migration background) and native couples (i.e. couples where both partners have no migration background). Excluding couples who have their first child in the last quarter they are observed, as we are interested in the change in work intensities following parenthood, results in a sample of 7538 couples (5234 native couples and 2304 migrant origin couples).

2.2 Methods

Couple-level fixed effects panel models are used to compare women's relative work intensity in the household around childbearing in native and migrant origin couples. As fixed effects models account for any unchanging and unmeasured heterogeneity across couples, the analysis only considers differences within couples over time, making it unnecessary to identify and include all time-constant couple characteristics that potentially affect adjustments to work intensity after the transition to parenthood (Allison, 2009; Stock & Watson, 2015).

The main independent variable of interest is women's pre-birth hourly wage relative to their partner's pre-birth hourly wage, which only includes earnings from formal paid labour. The possible values of the indicator range from 0% to 100%, where 0% refers to a situation in which the male partner is the sole earner within the couple and 100% implies that the female partner earns the total household wage. Five categories are distinguished: couples in which women have a lower pre-birth hourly wage than their partner (relative work percentage of 0%-25% and 25%-45%), couples in which both partners have an equal hourly wage before parenthood (45%-55%) and couples in which the female partner earns more prior to parenthood (relative pre-birth work percentage of 55%-75% and 75%-100%). This measure is calculated based on hourly wages four quarters before the transition to parenthood.

[1] Self-employed women are excluded, as we have no information on their work intensity.

[2] Descriptive results show that women frequently decrease their work intensity or take maternity leave in the quarter preceding the birth of a child.

[3] Individuals with a migration background are defined as individuals who have a foreign nationality, who are born with a foreign nationality or who have at least one foreign born parent. Natives are defined as individuals whose parents are both born in Belgium.

In the analysis, couples are stratified by migration background and our model includes i) time relative to the first birth (distinguishing quarters -4, -3, -2, -1, 0, 1, 2, 3, 4-7, 8-11, 12-15, 16-19, 20-23) and ii) the interaction between time and women's pre-birth relative hourly wage to assess whether the change in women's relative work percentage in the household around childbearing differs by their pre-birth relative hourly wage. The fourth quarter before the birth of the child is used as reference point, so women's relative work intensity in each quarter is compared to their work intensity one year before the birth of the first child.

3. Preliminary Results

Figure 1 shows for couples with different migration backgrounds the change in women's relative work intensity in the household around first childbirth by their pre-birth relative hourly wage, and preliminary results suggest that the impact of women's pre-birth relative wages potentially differs by couples' migration background. In line with micro-economic and bargaining theories we see a clear gradient by women's relative hourly wage one year before birth among couples where both partners have no migration background (Figure 1a) and where the woman is native (Figure 1b). Women who have a lower hourly wage than their partner four quarters before the birth of the first child reduce their working hours to a stronger extent than women who have a higher pre-birth hourly wage than their partner. However, women's relative work intensity in the household still decreases after parenthood even among female main earner couples (i.e. negative change in women's relative work intensity after parenthood), which is in line with previous studies for Belgium. On the other hand, this gradient is less clear among couples with migrant origin women (Figures 1c and 1d), suggesting that other factors play a more important role (e.g. employment stability, cultural norms, access to care).

4. Future work

The presented results are a first exploration and the analyses will be elaborated further in three ways. First, rather than stratifying our analyses by couples' migration background, we will include the interaction between time around first childbirth and couples' migration background to test whether women's relative work intensity in the household is disproportionally affected by parenthood in migrant origin couples compared to native couples. Second, among migrant origin couples we will distinguish different generations (first and second) and origin groups (European and non-European). Third, the current analyse are restricted to couples where both partners are employed before the transition to parenthood. However, research repeatedly shows that migrant (origin) men and women have higher unemployment and inactivity rates compared to natives. Therefore, also gender dynamics in jobless couples and couples where only one of the partners is employed will be explored.

5. References

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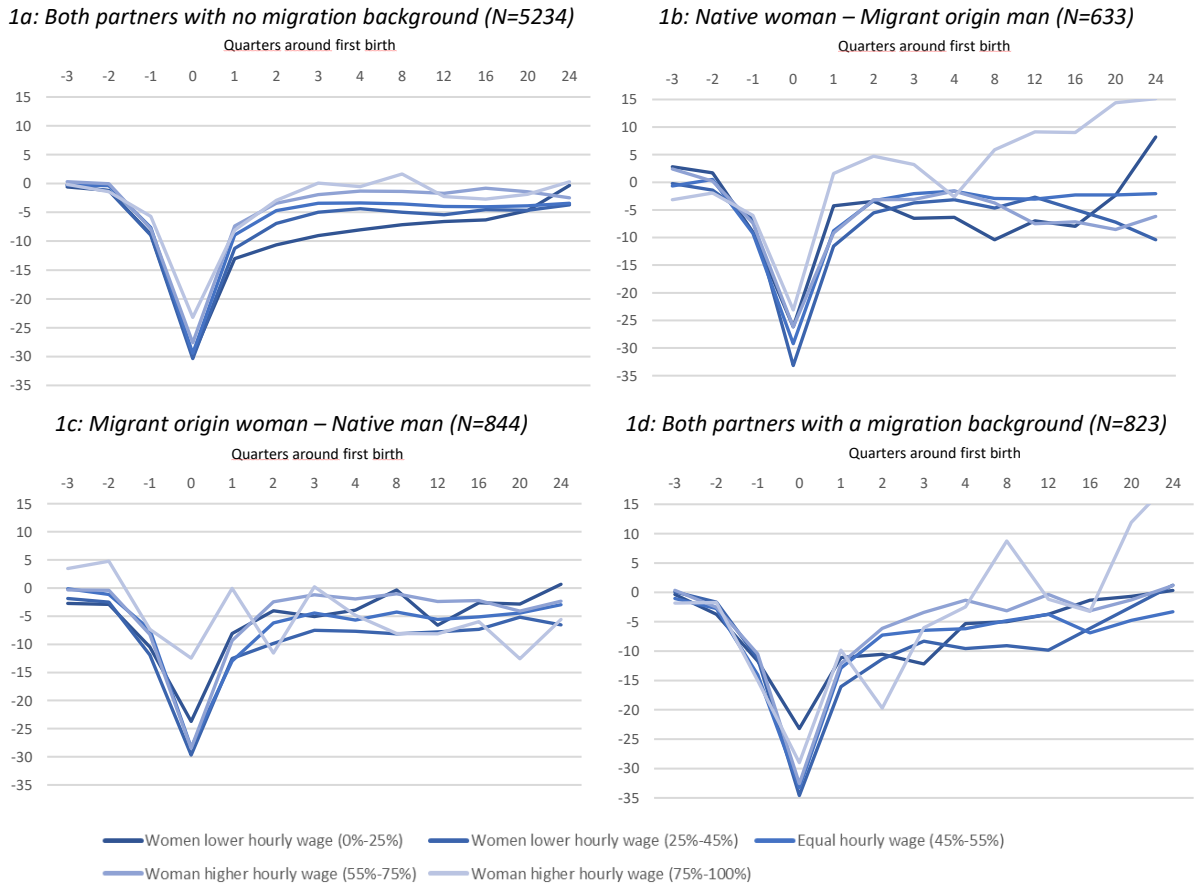
Figure 1: Change in women's relative work intensity in the household around first childbirth by women's relative hourly wage one year before parenthood (point of reference: relative work intensity 1 year (4 quarters) before first childbirth)



Note: Work intensity reflects the percentage of the standard number of work hours in a full-time contract in the employment sector considered.
Source: Belgian ASD-Panel, 1999-2010, calculations by authors.