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Research Article

Ready for parenthood? Dual earners' relative labour market positions and entry into parenthood in Belgium

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Contents

1	Introduction	902
2	The Belgian institutional context	904
3	Theoretical framework and previous findings	905
3.1	Partners' labour market characteristics and parenthood	905
3.2	Financial resources, job stability, time availability, and sector of employment: previous findings	907
3.3	Hypotheses	909
4	Data and methods	910
5	Results	915
5.1	Descriptive results	915
5.2	Multivariate results	919
6	Discussion and conclusion	922
7	Acknowledgements	925
	References	926

Ready for parenthood? Dual earners' relative labour market positions and entry into parenthood in Belgium

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Rising symmetry in public gender roles as a result of women's rising educational and labour market participation could make both partners' labour market positions equally relevant with respect to family formation. It is, however, unclear whether and to what extent this evolution has materialised. To date, few studies have examined couple dynamics in the employment–fertility link, and especially the gendered nature of this link remains understudied.

OBJECTIVE

This study examines the effect of dual earners' relative income, job stability, time availability, and employment-sector-specific flexibility in terms of work regimes on the transition to parenthood in Belgium.

METHODS

Using longitudinal microdata from the Belgian Administrative Socio-Demographic Panel, we estimate discrete-time hazard models of conception leading to a first birth.

RESULTS

Controlling for employment characteristics at the household level, we find higher first birth hazards when the female partner has higher time availability or access to flexible work regimes, suggesting a persistent gendered precondition to parenthood. By contrast, the gender distribution of income does not affect the transition to parenthood.

CONTRIBUTION

This study adds to the literature by simultaneously considering a broad array of partners' employment characteristics in an institutional setting that strongly focuses on

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facilitating the work–family combination. Our findings suggest that there is a shift away from a traditionally gendered fulfilment of labour market preconditions to parenthood in dual earner couples, but not unambiguously towards gender-neutral patterns. Particularly, the time availability and access to flexible work regimes of the female partner rather than the male partner seem to be of importance in the couples' transition to parenthood.

1. Introduction

Financial resources, certainty about the future labour market, and availability of time have been identified as preconditions for having a first child (Begall 2013; Jalovaara and Miettinen 2013; Schmitt 2012; Vignoli, Drefahl, and De Santis 2012). In the male breadwinner–female caregiver model that became firmly entrenched in the first half of the 20th century, the dominant gender division of labour implied that it was the male partner's responsibility to establish a solid labour market position and secure financial resources, whereas the main responsibility of the female partner was to have (or make) time to care for children. In the second half of the 20th century, however, female educational attainment and labour market participation increased, resulting in decreasing gender differences in the public sphere (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, and Brandén 2013; McDonald 2000) and a rise in dual earner households. Although the increasing symmetry in public gender roles could, in turn, erode asymmetrical gender roles in the family – the so-called second stage of the gender revolution – and make both partners' labour market positions equally relevant with respect to family formation, it is unclear whether and to what extent these evolutions have materialised.

Research has widely corroborated the importance of employment and, more specifically, time availability, financial resources, and job stability as preconditions for parenthood and indicates that failure to meet these criteria typically entails postponement of parenthood (Andersson 2000; Kreyenfeld 2015; Matysiak and Vignoli 2008; Vikat 2004; Wood and Neels 2017; Wood, Vergauwen, and Neels 2015). To date, research has predominantly considered women's labour market positions, while studies explicitly exploring the potentially gendered nature of the employment–fertility link have mostly examined men and women separately (Dribe and Stanfors 2008; Hart 2015; Liefbroer and Corijn 1999; Winkler-Dworak and Toulemon 2007). Although this body of research has unveiled different mechanisms in men and women, it fails to consider how partners' relative positions within the household affect the decision to enter parenthood. To date, few studies have addressed these couple dynamics explicitly (Begall 2013; Inanc 2015; Jalovaara and Miettinen 2013; Kaufman and Bernhardt 2012;

Schmitt 2012; Trimarchi and Van Bavel 2018; Vignoli, Drefahl, and De Santis 2012). Jalovaara and Miettinen (2013) find gender-neutral patterns in Finland, as employment and a higher income of both partners promote parenthood regardless of gender. For Italy, Vignoli, Drefahl, and De Santis (2012) underline the importance of both partners being employed in view of parenthood, but find that the economic situation of the male partner – that is, having a stable and well-paid job – is nevertheless decisive. By contrast, Begall (2013) concludes that in the Netherlands the educational level and earning potential of the female partner are stronger predictors of the timing of the first birth than those of the male partner. While these studies suggest the potential added value of incorporating information on both partners' employment positions, they focus on a limited selection of labour market characteristics in addition to activity status, such as income (Jalovaara and Miettinen 2013; Vignoli, Drefahl, and De Santis 2012), duration of contract (Vignoli, Drefahl, and De Santis 2012), or alternative indicators of earning potential (Begall 2013).

Using detailed longitudinal microdata on both partners from the Belgian Social Security Registers, we examine the effect of dual earners' relative labour market characteristics on the transition to parenthood in Belgium between 2000 and 2010. We build on and extend previous studies in several ways. First, this article uses uniquely rich data for Belgian dual earner couples to assess the potentially gendered effects of employment characteristics on the transition to parenthood. The limited body of research that has adopted a couple perspective on the effects of labour market positions on fertility has hitherto been severely hampered by data limitations, as most data sources lack information on different aspects of partners' labour market positions other than activity or employment. Especially factors that shape partners' agency – such as access to flexible work arrangements or sector-specific parental leave arrangements – have been largely overlooked, although they are likely to affect the decision to have a child by shaping the perceived feasibility of combining work and family (Begall and Mills 2013; Martín García 2010; Ohlsson-Wijk 2015a, 2015b). Hence, this study adds to the literature by simultaneously considering a broader array of partners' labour market characteristics such as income, job stability, and work regime, in tandem with partners' access to flexible work arrangements in their respective sectors of employment, as measured by sector- and gender-specific percentages of part-time work and parental leave uptake.

Second, the focus on dual earners is crucial in order to take research on couple dynamics in the employment–fertility link a step further and develop a more in-depth understanding of couples' specific employment characteristics in view of parenthood. We effectively consider the relative distribution of financial resources, job stability, and time availability within couples, each time controlling for the household level, rather than including both partners' activity status or labour market characteristics separately

and allowing interactions or analysing men and women separately. In this way we explicitly focus on the gender distribution of labour market resources within couples in relation to the transition to parenthood rather than merely considering the absolute level of resources, stability, or time each partner contributes. Hence, our results allow conclusions on the potentially gendered nature of the relation between employment characteristics and the transition to parenthood.

Third, Belgium provides a compelling case to study the transition to parenthood in dual earner households. In order to safeguard the labour market participation of both partners during the transition to parenthood, Belgium exhibits relatively strong work–family reconciliation policies that often involve the outsourcing of household and care responsibilities (Ciccia and Verloo 2012). These family policies, such as subsidized public childcare, subsidized outsourcing of household work, and parental leave regimes, may be instrumental in reducing gendered preconditions for parenthood. However, despite this institutional setup geared towards gender equality in labour market participation, clear differentials by socioeconomic position (e.g., income level) and gender (e.g., high gender gap in part-time employment) continue to exist in the Belgian labour market and Belgian social policy.

2. The Belgian institutional context

In several respects, Belgium does well when it comes to gender equality in the labour market and family policies that facilitate the work–family combination: Belgium does particularly well compared to other OECD/EU28 countries with regard to decreasing the gender pay gap (European Institute for Gender Equality 2017; OECD 2019). Furthermore, as of the early 2000s, Belgium is included in the shortlist of countries that meet the Barcelona childcare targets of 33% enrolment for 0–2 year olds and 90% for children aged 3 to 6 (Population Council 2006). Belgium has also been a forerunner country concerning the subsidized outsourcing of household work since the introduction of service vouchers in 2004 (Marx and Vandelannoote 2015). In addition, an individual, non-transferable entitlement to parental leave is granted to mothers and fathers who meet the (strict) eligibility criteria based on previous employment. This entitlement allows a parent to take up full-time leave for a maximum of four months³ at a flat-rate benefit for each child younger than 12⁴ (RVA Dienst Studies 2014). Full-time

³ Three months until 01.06.2012, four months from this date onwards, due to changes in regulation.

⁴ From the introduction of parental leave in 1997, parents were only entitled to leave for children younger than 4 years. This age limit was raised to 6 years in 2005 and subsequently to 12 years in 2009.

employees can also opt for a reduction of their working hours by 50% or 20% for a longer period⁵ and an accordingly reduced benefit.

There are, however, other aspects with regard to gender equality in the labour market and specific features of work–family policies in which Belgium still falls short. Belgium exhibits a moderate – though still considerable – gender gap in employment compared to the EU28 average, and one of the highest gender gaps in part-time employment in the EU28 (around 32%) (Eurofund 2016). Moreover, gender segregation in employment sectors remains high (European Institute for Gender Equality 2017). The predominantly female part-time employment and gender segregation in employment sectors – with female-dominated sectors often exhibiting more or better flexibility measures – imply that it is predominantly women who are able to fulfil the time availability precondition for parenthood. In addition, childcare and other outsourcing policies predominantly alleviate (former) female responsibilities and do not encourage higher involvement of men in household and childcare tasks. Furthermore, despite the gender-equal setup of Belgian parental leave policies, this policy is labelled ‘explicitly genderizing’ by Saxonberg (2013), meaning that it explicitly promotes different gender roles for men and women. This is mostly due to the long and well-paid maternity leave versus the short paternity leave, which potentially introduces a gendered habitus among new parents and may therefore give rise to gendered behaviour (Wood and Marynissen 2019). Furthermore, the low flat-rate replacement benefits, limited flexibility, and strict eligibility criteria provide few incentives for parents to take up parental leave. Also, in practice, access to flexible work arrangements and parental leave remain subject to substantial variation between employment sectors. These impediments are reflected in the fact that the share of mothers taking up parental leave consistently exceeds the share of fathers taking up parental leave, and that even among mothers, parental leave uptake is far from a universal practice in Belgium. Also, the overwhelming majority of leave-uptake is part-time or 1/5th, implying continued labour force participation.

3. Theoretical framework and previous findings

3.1 Partners’ labour market characteristics and parenthood

Microeconomic theories suggest that sufficient financial means, certainty about future labour market positions, and time availability at the couple level are positively associated with the transition to parenthood (Becker 1991). Such a favourable situation with regard to economic resources is more likely if both partners contribute to these

⁵ Eight months in the case of a 50% reduction in working hours, 20 months in the case of a 20% reduction.

household-level labour market resources. Furthermore, anticipated changes in partners' labour market positions after the transition to parenthood may influence couples' decisions as to whether and when to have a child (Liefbroer 2005). These anticipated changes concern, among other things, opportunity costs, which are related to the anticipated trade-off between income and time: spending more/less time in paid labour generally increases/decreases financial resources, but decreases/increases the time available to care for a child. Hence, the higher one's income the higher the opportunity cost of making the transition to parenthood, as this transition may involve a reduction in working hours and therefore income in order to take care of the child. According to these microeconomic perspectives, opportunity costs are, in principle, unrelated to gender. However, because pregnancy and some aspects of nurturing a new-born child (e.g., breastfeeding) are predominantly female matters, the transition to parenthood may impact women's labour force participation and resources more strongly than those of the male partner, yielding higher opportunity costs for women compared to men – at least around the time of childbirth (Grunow, Schulz, and Blossfeld 2012; Hochschild and Machung 1989). These mechanisms may be further reinforced by different parenting and employment norms for men and women. According to the Doing Gender perspective (West and Zimmerman 1987), men and women do not only conform to but also seek to reproduce dominant gender norms (Brines 1993; Schneider 2011). Within the Belgian context the male-breadwinner model became firmly entrenched in the first half of the 20th century, which is reflected in the caregiver role being more salient to the female identity (Grunow and Evertsson 2016), and the breadwinner role being more salient to the male identity. Empirical evidence shows that even today and even among dual earners, gender-traditional divisions of (un)paid labour emerge following the transition to parenthood (Baxter, Hewitt, and Haynes 2008; Grunow, Schulz, and Blossfeld 2012) that cannot be fully accounted for by partners' pre-birth labour market positions (Wood, Kil, and Marynissen 2018). As a result, women are frequently found to postpone childbearing until they have established a relatively solid position in the labour market (Matysiak and Vignoli 2008; Vignoli, Drefahl, and De Santis 2012), as this may entail higher flexibility and a higher income that enables outsourcing of childcare. In addition, men and women may self-select into labour market positions they consider favourable to making the transition to parenthood, e.g., self-selecting into flexible employment sectors or high-earning and stable jobs. Hence, due to unequal opportunity costs and potentially traditionally gendered parenting norms, the gender distribution of financial means, job stability, and time availability within couples is likely to affect the transition to parenthood.

This assumption has, however, been criticized because it is based on a high degree of role specialization between men and women (Oppenheimer 1994). As women's earning potential has become similar to that of men, gender specialization within

couples may no longer yield the most efficient division of labour in view of parenthood (Winkler-Dworak and Toulemon 2007). In addition, paid work is often both an economic necessity for and the preference of both partners (Begall 2013); Oppenheimer (1988, 2003) argues that the declining ability of men to serve as the family's single breadwinner is a key factor in understanding contemporary fertility decisions. However, whether women's share of the household's socioeconomic resources impedes or encourages the transition to parenthood also depends on the degree to which family policies facilitate the work–family combination; e.g., subsidized outsourcing of household and childcare tasks may reduce opportunity costs in dual earner couples and encourage continued (full-time) labour market participation of both partners. Several studies indeed report a positive effect of women's employment and economic resources on the transition to parenthood (Andersson 2000; Andersson, Kreyenfeld, and Mika 2014; Kreyenfeld 2015; Matysiak and Vignoli 2008; Wood and Neels 2017). Hence, given the increasing economic participation of women it is quite likely that the transition to parenthood depends similarly on both partners' socioeconomic resources, while economic uncertainty on the part of either partner may inhibit entry into parenthood.

3.2 Financial resources, job stability, time availability, and sector of employment: previous findings

The existing literature considers different aspects of partners' labour market positions in relation to parenthood. First, with respect to financial resources, couples evaluate both whether their current income is sufficient to raise a child and whether they are satisfied with their current income position or want to improve it before making the transition to parenthood. Further, an unequal division of income between partners may be unfavourable for entering parenthood as it implies a higher dependence on one person's income instead of it being a shared responsibility. Empirical research shows that the effect of men's income on the transition to parenthood is positive in different contexts (Hart 2015; Jalovaara and Miettinen 2013; Vignoli, Drefahl, and De Santis 2012), but mixed results are found for women. Positive effects of women's income on childbirth are found in Finland (Jalovaara and Miettinen 2013; Vikat 2004), Norway (Hart 2015), Sweden (Andersson 2000), and Denmark (Andersson, Kreyenfeld, and Mika 2014), whereas negative effects are found in the Netherlands (Begall and Mills 2013), Italy (Rondinelli, Aassve, and Billari 2010), and Norway (Rønsen 2004).

Second, job stability is likely to influence decisions regarding parenthood, as it means that couples will have continued access to financial resources in order to raise the child. As a result, the arguments regarding job stability are similar to those

concerning income. Vignoli, Drefahl, and De Santis (2012) find that a permanent occupation positively affects the transition to parenthood for both partners in Italy. In Britain, however, female employment negatively affects the transition to parenthood, irrespective of the male partner's employment status (Inanc 2015). Controlling for the male partner's employment status, Schmitt (2012) finds positive effects of female unemployment on the propensity to have a first birth for women with a moderate or low level of education in Germany and the United Kingdom. For women in France and highly educated women in Germany and the United Kingdom the effect of unemployment becomes negative (Schmitt 2012). Couples' concerns regarding the future labour market are closely connected with aggregate-level developments in the economy, as adverse economic conditions increase uncertainty about future labour market positions. This may lead to postponement of the first birth until there is a prospect of a relatively stable labour market, particularly for (young) couples with (still untapped) labour market potential (Goldstein et al. 2013). Ahn and Mira (2002) provide evidence that in most OECD countries the fertility rate shows a negative response to unemployment in the business cycle: fertility is pro-cyclical (Sobotka, Skirbekk, and Philipov 2011). Research in France and other European countries confirms that women are highly sensitive to the general labour market situation and all women, not only those who face unemployment, postpone fertility under adverse economic conditions (Neels, Theunynck, and Wood 2013; Pailhé and Solaz 2012).

Third, the precondition of time availability implies that there is sufficient time available to care for a child, given the current working hours of both partners. Additionally, couples consider whether they have access to working hour reduction once they make the transition to parenthood, which is typically closely related to partners' employment sectors (Bettio et al. 2009). Characteristics specific to the sector of employment – such as access to flexible work and parental leave arrangements – are likely to affect the decision-making process of having a first birth by shaping the perceived feasibility of combining work and family (Castles 2003; Martín García 2010). Both sector-specific availability of these reconciliation measures and the normative aspect of making use of these measures matter. To the extent that a larger share of mothers and fathers in a specific employment sector work reduced hours or take up parental leave, future parents may perceive it as increasingly feasible and socially acceptable to make use of such policies. However, for women, gender stratification at the sector level may also discount their resources in terms of income and job stability (Blumberg 1984). Higher flexibility for women than for men or at least the impression that it is more acceptable for women to make use of flexible arrangements creates the expectation that the female partner will reduce working hours to care for the child. To the extent that uptake of flexible work arrangements is strongly governed by gender norms, the effects may again sharply differ depending on whether the male or female

partner's employment sector is considered. Empirical research on the link between employment sector and fertility is relatively scarce due to the lack of detailed information on each partner's sector characteristics. Begall and Mills (2013) find higher first-birth hazards for women working in female-dominated sectors in the Netherlands. In Sweden, first-birth risks are higher for men working in male-dominated sectors and women working in female-dominated sectors (Ohlsson-Wijk 2015b). Martín García (2010) finds that women working in health and education have an advantage in combining motherhood and labour market participation that positively affects fertility. Although these studies find positive associations between sector characteristics and first-birth risks, caution is needed when interpreting these associations, as men and women who are more family-oriented may self-select into employment sectors that facilitate the work–family combination. Moreover, this is also the case for income, job stability, and working hours.

3.3 Hypotheses

The overview of the empirical literature shows that the associations between partners' labour market characteristics and the transition to parenthood differ depending on whether men or women are considered and between different contexts. However, very little information is available on how the relative distribution of these resources – especially of working hours – between partners affects the decision to have a first birth. Based on the mechanisms discussed above, the following hypotheses are derived.

According to microeconomic theory and the Doing Gender perspective, we can expect that the costs related to parenthood differ between men and women due to the elevated opportunity costs of parenthood for women and prevailing traditional gender norms. Therefore, we expect the female partner having a higher income and/or job stability than her partner to be negatively related to the transition to parenthood, whereas the male partner having a higher income and/or job stability is expected to be positively related to parenthood (Hypothesis 1a). In this context we can additionally expect that the transition to parenthood is more likely in couples where the male partner works more hours than the female partner and where the female partner works in an employment sector with high levels of part-time work and parental leave uptake (Hypothesis 2a).

However, the abovementioned perspectives have been criticized, as they assume a high degree of role specialization between men and women (Oppenheimer 1994). The earning potential of women and men is becoming increasingly similar, and there is a trend away from traditional gender norms. According to this perspective, we may expect that the relative distribution of income and job stability between partners is not

related to the transition to parenthood, or that a higher income and/or job stability of the male or female partner will be similarly related to the transition to parenthood (Hypothesis 1b). In this view we can additionally expect that the transition to parenthood is more likely in couples where either one of the partners has more time available to raise a child or has good access to flexible working arrangements (Hypothesis 2b). This is the case when there is an unequal distribution of working hours between partners (meaning that at least one partner is already working part-time) and when either one of the partners is working in an employment sector with higher levels of part-time work and parental leave uptake.

4. Data and methods

We use data from the Belgian Administrative Socio-Demographic Panel (ASD Panel) that was constructed using microdata from the National Register and the Crossroads Bank for Social Security. The panel provides detailed longitudinal information on a representative sample of 108,511 women aged 15–50 years, legally residing in Belgium in the period from 1st January 1999 to 31st December 2010. To preserve the cross-sectional representativeness of the panel throughout the observation period, annual top-up samples of 15 year olds were drawn, as well as annual samples of women aged 16–50 years who settled in Belgium in the preceding year. In addition to the sampled women the panel includes all household members residing in these women's households on the 1st January of each observation year. As a result, the panel provides a representative sample of heterosexual coresident couples. The ASD Panel provides detailed quarterly information on labour market positions and income of all household members, as well as annual information on household composition.

We observe nulliparous women who are aged 18 and older, no longer enrolled in education, and have a coresident partner. The sample is further restricted to couple-quarters where both partners are employed.⁶ Couple-quarters for which no information is available on the variables of interest are excluded. This restriction predominantly excludes couples where one or both of the partners are self-employed and consequently no information on income, work regime, or employment sector is available. Couples are followed until (1) their first child is born, (2) the female partner reaches the age of 45 (the presumed end of women's reproductive life span), (3) the couple separates, or (4) censoring occurs as a result of mortality, emigration, or reaching the end of the observation period on December 31, 2010. The analytic sample provides 133,130

⁶ This is 73% of the selection of nulliparous women aged 18 and older, who are no longer in education and have a co-resident partner.

couple-quarters for 13,822 couples, of which 5,632 had their first child between the third quarter of 2000 and the fourth quarter of 2010.

We estimate discrete-time hazard models of conception leading to a first birth using a logit link function. The dependent variable takes a value of 1 in the couple-quarter where the conception leading to the first birth takes place and a value of 0 in all other quarters. We analyse conception leading to a first birth, being the event of a first birth lagged with four quarters rather than the actual birth to avoid reverse causation in parameter estimates. We lag by four quarters instead of three to ensure that the independent variables are measured before conception. Table 2 provides the distribution of the covariates and associated crude birth rates, which are calculated as the proportion of first births relative to the number of couple-quarters observed in the category considered.

The baseline hazard function models the conception risk as a quadratic function of the number of quarters elapsed since the quarter in which women had their 18th birthday.⁷ Since the timing of first birth is closely associated with women's level of education (Neels and De Wachter 2010), we include interactions between the educational level of the female partner and the baseline hazard function (both linear and quadratic terms). 'Level of education' of the female partner is a categorical variable with four categories, distinguishing (1) no education or lower secondary education, (2) higher secondary education, (3) tertiary education (or higher), and (4) unknown. The level of education of the male partner is not included due to large numbers of missing values for this variable.⁸

To consider the effect of financial resources we distinguish between the level of household income and the relative income distribution within couples. 'Household income' is the sum per quarter of the gross wages of both partners in classes of 50 euros, not including benefits or replacement incomes of any kind. 'Relative income' is operationalised by two dummy variables, indicating whether (1) the male partner earns at least 500 euros per quarter more than the female partner, or (2) the female partner earns at least 500 euros per quarter more than the male partner, leaving partners with similar incomes as the reference category.

As future labour market positions are uncertain, past employment patterns are used as an indication of job stability and future access to paid labour. As the data exhibit a

⁷ We considered other measurements of time (e.g., quarters since graduation or quarters since cohabitation or marriage) but for the larger part of our sample it is not possible to operationalize these alternative clocks due to left censoring. Many women in our sample have already graduated and/or entered cohabitation or marriage before entering the observation period, in which case no information is available on age at graduation or age at the start of cohabitation or marriage.

⁸ It is inherent to the use of register data that there is only gradual incorporation of data on level of education; hence the still considerable number of 'missings' on the level of education of both the male and female partner in our data.

quarterly measurement of individuals' activity status (employed/unemployed/inactive), 'past employment intensity' reflects the share (percentage points) of quarters that a person was employed in the preceding 2 to 8 quarters. The indicator is only available when individuals have been observed for at least 6 months (2 quarters) and provides information on continuity of employment in a moving window of up to 2 years (8 quarters). In the analysis we consider both the 'household past employment intensity', which is the sum of the past employment intensities of both partners and its relative distribution between partners, and the 'relative past employment intensity', operationalized using two dummy variables indicating whether (1) the male partner has a higher past employment intensity than the female partner or (2) the female partner has a higher past employment intensity than the male partner, using partners with the same past employment intensity as the reference category.

To operationalize time availability, we consider the household work percentage (employment regime) and its relative distribution within the couple. The work percentage reflects the percentage of hours worked relative to the standard number of hours for a fulltime contract in the sector. For persons who combine multiple jobs, these percentages are cumulated and truncated at a value of 100. Information on the absolute number of hours spent in paid work is not available. The 'household work percentage' is the sum of the work percentages of both partners, with values between 0 and 200. The 'relative work percentage' is again operationalized using two dummy variables, indicating whether (1) the male partner has a work percentage that is at least 5% higher than the work percentage of his partner or (2) the female partner has a work percentage that is at least 5% higher than the work percentage of her partner, using partners with the similar work percentages as the reference category. Table 2 already shows that couples where women have a higher work percentage than their male partner have lower crude birth rates than other couples, suggesting that women's time availability is essential.

To have an indication of the flexibility that partners have in their respective employment sectors to reduce work hours, we use information on all mothers ($n = 33,614$) and fathers ($n = 33,335$)⁹ in the ASD Panel to construct sector-specific measures of part-time work and parental leave uptake for both men and women. We distinguish ten employment sectors: (1) agriculture, mineral extraction, industry; (2) wholesale, retail; (3) logistics, storage, energy distribution; (4) education; (5) public administration, extraterritorial organisations; (6) health services, social care; (7) art, leisure, recreation, other services; (8) finance, real estate; (9) administration, support services, professionals; and (10) hotel and catering. 'Percentage part-time work' is the time-varying sector- and gender-specific percentage of mothers/fathers whose youngest

⁹ We use information on all mothers and fathers who are employed and whose youngest child is below 12 years old.

child is below 12 years old and who work part-time. Part-time work is defined as working less than 85% of the standard number of working hours in the sector considered. Similarly, ‘percentage parental leave’ is the time-varying sector- and gender-specific percentage of parental leave uptake among mothers/fathers whose youngest child is below 4, 6, or 12 years old depending on the year of observation.¹⁰ Parental leave uptake may take the form of a 100% reduction of working hours, as well as reductions of 50% or 20%. We consider part-time work and parental leave uptake separately for men and women because a measure that is not gender-specific would not only measure the percentage of part-time work or parental leave uptake, but also variation in the gender composition within sectors. We calculate these sector-specific flexibility measures on a larger sample and per quarter (thus time-varying). In combination with the lagged dependent variable, in this way we avoid the predictor variable being driven by the outcome variable. Figure 1 shows time series between 1999 and 2010 of parental leave uptake and part-time employment in various sectors of employment for both men and women. To include this information in the analyses we calculated a single measure of flexibility that captures both part-time work and parental leave use and reflects the time-varying percentage of mothers/fathers with a child under age 12 that work part-time or take up parental leave in each partner’s employment sector. ‘Relative sector-specific flexibility’ compares flexibility between partners, distinguishing (1) both partners having low flexibility, (2) the woman having low and her partner having high flexibility, (3) the woman having high and her partner having low flexibility, and (4) both partners having high flexibility. Flexibility is considered high/low when the percentage of part-time work or parental leave uptake in the person’s sector of employment is higher/lower than the gender-specific mean percentage of part-time work or parental leave uptake in the quarter considered.

Finally, we control for several sociodemographic characteristics that affect the probability of conception leading to a first child. ‘Marital status’ is a dummy variable with a value of 1 if the couple is married and a value of 0 in the case of unmarried cohabitation. We control for migrant origin and generation, as fertility patterns differ between couples with different migration backgrounds (Kulu et al. 2017). ‘Migration background of the couple’ considers the migration background of both the male and the female partner, distinguishing: (1) Belgian origin, (2) 1st generation migrants, and (3) 2nd generation migrants, thus resulting in nine combinations. Further, because family policies, policy coverage, and labour market conditions differ slightly between Flanders, Wallonia, and Brussels, the analyses control for region of residence. Finally, to control for aggregate level economic conditions that induce postponement of fertility

¹⁰ Due to changes in legislation, between 1997 and June 31st 2005 parents could take up parental leave for their child until it reached the age of 4, between 1st July 2005 and 31st June 2009 until the child reached the age of 6, and since 1st July 2009 until the child reaches the age of 12.

(Neels, Theunynck, and Wood 2013), time-varying age- and gender-specific unemployment rates, obtained from Statistics Belgium (2018), are included.

Table 1: Summary statistics

	N couple quarters	% couple quarters	Birth rate
Conception leading to a first birth			
No	127,498	95.77	
Yes	5,632	4.23	
Relative income			
Man higher income	81,018	60.86	0.041
Equal income	14,819	11.13	0.044
Woman higher income	37,293	28.01	0.045
Household income (euros)			
0–1,949	370	0.28	0.024
2,000–3,949	1,678	1.26	0.041
4,000–5,949	5,566	4.18	0.038
6,000–7,949	13,487	10.13	0.042
8,000–9,949	23,276	17.48	0.039
10,000–11,949	27,380	20.57	0.043
12,000–13,949	23,322	17.52	0.046
14,000–15,949	15,360	11.54	0.045
16,000–17,949	9,283	6.97	0.041
18,000–429,649	13,408	10.07	0.041
Relative past employment intensity			
Man has worked more	24,865	18.68	0.039
Equal past work intensity	99,109	74.45	0.043
Woman has worked more	9,156	6.88	0.047
Household past employment intensity			
0–99	1,469	1.1	0.031
100–119	4,021	3.02	0.038
120–139	3,260	2.45	0.034
140–159	8,518	6.4	0.040
160–179	7,513	5.64	0.048
180–199	10,712	8.05	0.043
200	97,637	73.34	0.043
Relative work percentage			
Man works more	30,676	23.04	0.037
Equal work percentage	96,053	72.15	0.045
Woman works more	6,401	4.81	0.032
Household work percentage			
0–95	585	0.44	0.038
100–115	1,601	1.2	0.042
120–135	2,573	1.93	0.040
140–155	12,632	9.49	0.035
160–175	7,146	5.37	0.036
180–195	13,472	10.12	0.037
200	95,121	71.45	0.045

Table 1: (Continued)

	N couple quarters	% couple quarters	Birth rate
Relative sector-specific flexibility			
<i>Both low flexibility</i>	58,012	43.58	0.041
<i>Woman low, man high flexibility</i>	12,814	9.63	0.046
<i>Woman high, man low flexibility</i>	49,427	37.13	0.042
<i>Both high flexibility</i>	12,877	9.67	0.046
Age of the female partner			
18–25	26,980	20.27	0.046
25–30	49,405	37.11	0.060
30–35	25,656	19.27	0.046
35–40	16,265	12.22	0.015
40–45	14,824	11.13	0.001
Level of education female partner			
<i>Low</i>	10,076	7.57	0.037
<i>Middle</i>	27,531	20.68	0.048
<i>High</i>	38,111	28.63	0.054
<i>Unknown</i>	57,412	43.12	0.033
Marital status			
<i>Unmarried cohabitation</i>	71,754	53.9	0.034
<i>Married</i>	61,376	46.1	0.052
Migration background of the couple			
<i>Woman 1st generation - Man 1st generation</i>	4,277	3.21	0.049
<i>Man 2nd generation</i>	1,645	1.24	0.044
<i>Man Belgian</i>	7,117	5.35	0.033
<i>Woman 2nd generation - Man 1st generation</i>	1,539	1.16	0.077
<i>Man 2nd generation</i>	2,993	2.25	0.064
<i>Man Belgian</i>	8,562	6.43	0.043
<i>Woman Belgian - Man 1st generation</i>	2,732	2.05	0.044
<i>Man 2nd generation</i>	8,289	6.23	0.042
<i>Man Belgian</i>	93,805	70.46	0.042
<i>Unknown</i>	2,171	1.63	0.026
Region			
<i>Flanders</i>	91,338	68.61	0.040
<i>Wallonia</i>	30,760	23.11	0.049
<i>Capital region of Brussels</i>	11,032	8.29	0.044
Total	133,130	100	

Source: BASD Panel 1999–2010, Authors' calculation

5. Results

5.1 Descriptive results

Figures 1a–1d show gender- and sector-specific percentages of part-time work and parental leave uptake between 1999 and 2010 among mothers/fathers having a child under age 12. Clearly, part-time work and leave uptake vary substantially between sectors, suggesting also that opportunities and constraints to combine work and family

vary accordingly. Regardless of sector, percentages are consistently higher for women than for men.

Percentages of mothers working part-time are high in all sectors (ranging between 25.30% and 66.79%), but there is considerable variation between sectors and within sectors over time (Figure 1a). The highest percentages of part-time work are found in hotel and catering (which may reflect job instability and uncertainty rather than flexibility) and health services and social care (the latter characterised by a predominantly female workforce). The lowest percentages of part-time work are found among mothers working in agriculture, logistics, and education (a sector in which fulltime working hours are already relatively compatible with family life and children's school attendance). By contrast, the percentages of part-time work among fathers are overall very low, regardless of sector (Figure 1b). The highest percentages are found in hotel and catering (which may again suggest instability) and education. Somewhat higher percentages of part-time work are again found in health services, social care, and art and leisure.

Regarding parental leave, there is again considerable variation in leave uptake among mothers, with percentages ranging between 0.08% and 47.57% (Figure 1c). The highest percentages are found in finance, real estate, logistics, and storage, whereas the lowest percentages are found in hotel and catering (potentially reflecting job instability and insecurity in this sector). By contrast, the percentages of parental leave uptake among fathers are overall very low (Figure 1d). Although some increase in leave uptake can be observed over time, percentages still range between 0% and 10.40%, with limited variation between sectors and over time.

Figure 1: Sector-specific percentages of part-time work and parental leave uptake among mothers and fathers respectively, Belgium (quarterly), 1999–2010

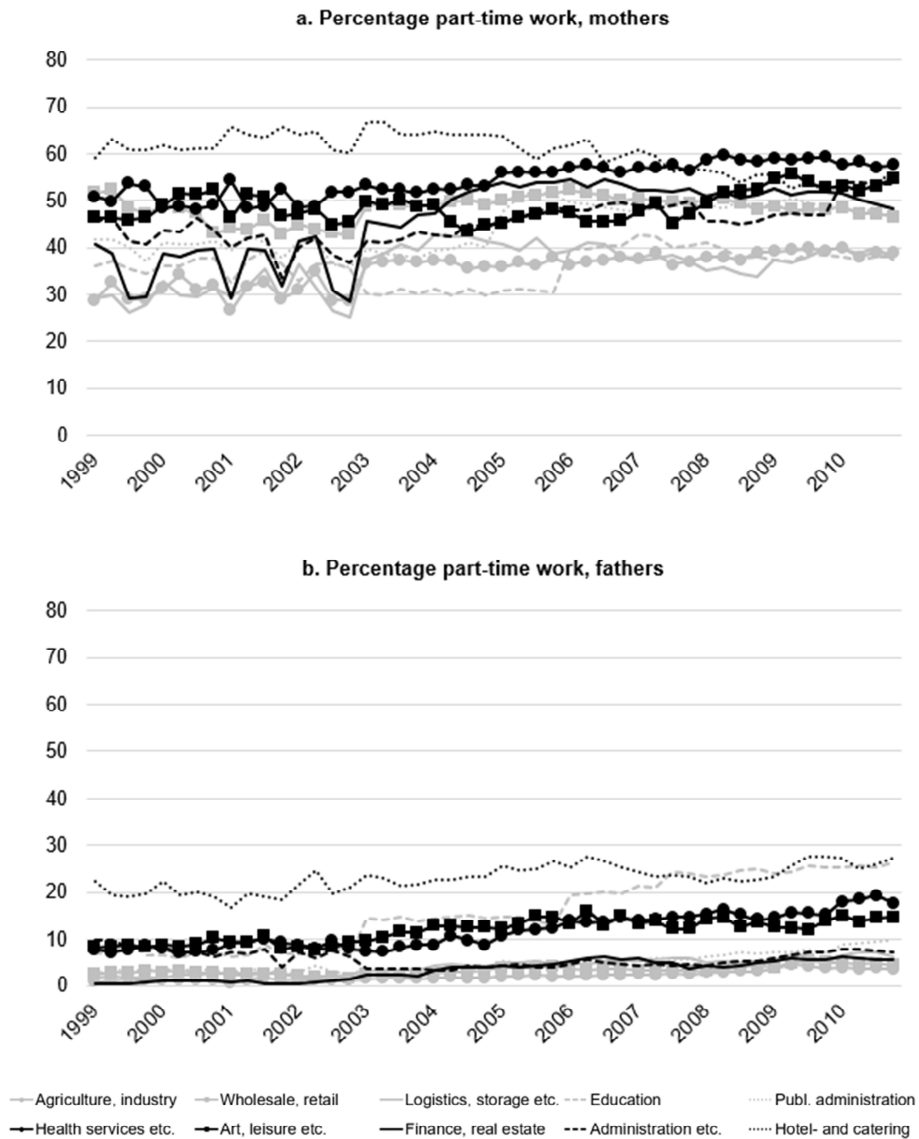
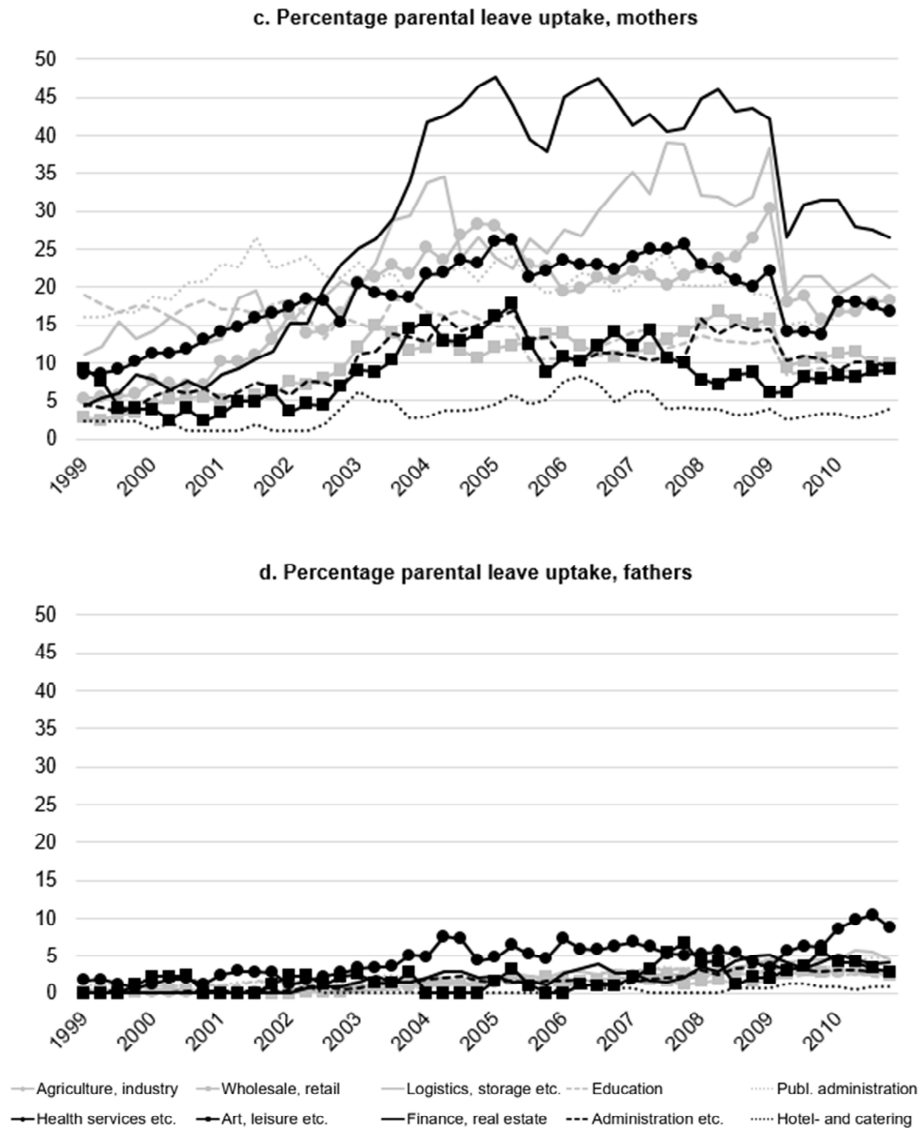


Figure 1: Sector-specific percentages of part-time work and parental leave uptake among mothers and fathers respectively, Belgium (quarterly), 1999–2010



Source: BASD Panel, calculations by authors

5.2 Multivariate results

Table 2 shows the results of the discrete-time event history models. We conducted the analyses in three steps. The first model includes only the household levels of income, past employment intensity, and work percentage. The second model additionally includes the relative distribution of these resources between partners. Finally, the third model includes relative sector-specific flexibility.¹¹

In contrast to the crude birth rates (Table 1), the main effects of the female partner's education show that couples in which the female partner has a low or middle level of education have a higher probability of making the transition to parenthood than couples in which the female partner is highly educated (Table 2). However, this main effect only reflects the situation at the first time interval, i.e., for couples in which the female partner is 18 years old. The negative effects of education interacted with the linear term of the exposure variable and coefficients close to 1 for the interaction of education with the quadratic term of the exposure variable indicate that the probability of having a first birth is higher for low- and middle-educated women at younger ages. At higher ages the probability of having a first birth is higher among the highly educated women in our sample.

With respect to financial resources, all models consistently show a small negative effect of household income on the transition to a first child, controlling for work percentages and sector-specific flexibility (Table 2). We attribute this small negative effect of household income to the selection of dual earner couples, which may consider themselves in most cases as having sufficient financial resources for parenthood. Increasing income may be further associated with longer working hours, thus reducing time availability, but the register data used for the analysis does not provide information on the actual number of hours worked in the household. As such, the finding in our study differs from findings for Finland and Italy that have typically found positive effects of both partners' incomes on the transition to parenthood, but these studies also include unemployed and inactive persons (Jalovaara and Miettinen 2013; Vignoli, Drefahl, and De Santis 2012). The effect of partners' relative incomes is insignificant,

¹¹ We also performed multiple sensitivity analyses, including interactions between the household level and relative distribution of the employment characteristics considered, the male partner's level of education, lagging the dependent variable – first birth – by only three quarters instead of four, and interactions between the female partner's relative variables and level of education. Most of the interactions did not significantly improve the model fit, and all models with interactions, as well as the models altering the lagging of the dependent variable or including the male partner's education, resulted in findings similar to those displayed in this paper. Moreover, analyses excluding couples with missing information on the female partner's education yield results similar to the results of the analyses on the sample used in this paper that includes an 'unknown' category for the female partner's education. This indicates that the missing values on education do not introduce appreciable bias to the analyses.

indicating gender-neutral patterns; in view of parenthood it does not matter whether it is the male or female partner that provides (the larger part of) these resources.

Regarding job stability, all models show that an increase in past employment intensity at the household level has a small positive effect on the transition to parenthood, as expected. In addition, the relative distribution of employment stability between partners influences the decision to have a first birth: when the male partner has a higher past employment intensity than the female partner the odds of having a first birth decrease by 10.5% compared to when both partners have an equal past employment intensity (Table 2, model III). We consider two possible explanations for the latter effect. (1) The uncertainty of predominantly relying on one partner's future access to financial resources compared to being able to rely on the future resources of both partners may negatively affect the transition to parenthood. In that case, however, this should also hold for the situation in which the female partner has a higher employment intensity. (2) The negative effect may be explained not by the fact that the male partner has a high past employment intensity, but rather by the female partner consequently having a low(er) past employment intensity than her partner.

Concerning time availability, the household work percentage has no effect on the probability of having a first child. However, the division of working hours between partners does influence the transition to parenthood: first birth hazards are negatively affected when the female partner has a higher work percentage than her partner. Controlling for income, the odds of having a first birth are 25.0% lower when the female partner has a higher work percentage than her partner compared to the situation where both partners have an equal work percentage (Table 2, model III).

Finally, controlling for relative income, past employment intensity, and work percentage, relative sector-specific flexibility significantly affects the transition to parenthood (Table 2, Model III). Couples where the female partner has high flexibility and the male partner has low flexibility show higher birth hazards than couples where both partners have low flexibility. A positive effect is also found for couples in which both partners have high flexibility. By contrast, couples where the female partner has low flexibility and the male partner has high flexibility (a small group, as Table 2 shows) do not differ significantly from couples where both partners have low flexibility. These results are in line with our expectation that higher flexibility is associated with higher birth hazards: A high percentage of part-time work or leave uptake in the partners' respective employment sectors may indicate that the work-family combination is considered feasible as the uptake of these policies is socially acceptable. However, higher flexibility could also be associated with lower birth hazards, as part-time work especially could also be an indication of precarious working conditions. Alternatively, a higher percentage of part-time work or leave uptake among women could favour gender specialization in which women are secondary earners and

primary caregivers, which might not be attractive to highly educated women (Baizan, Arpino, and Delclòs 2016). Either way, the mechanisms that could lead to a negative association between women's access to flexible work arrangements and entry into parenthood do not seem to prevail in the selection of dual-earner couples considered here. However, similar mechanisms may explain the partially non-significant effect of access to flexible work arrangements on birth hazards among men: A higher percentage of part-time work or parental leave uptake among fathers in the male partner's sector may create the expectation that the male partner will reduce his work hours accordingly and invest more time in childrearing, compared to the situation where the access to flexible work regimes in the sector of the male partner is low. To the extent that this deviates from gender role expectations around parenthood, the prospect may not be attractive to men and may negatively affect the transition to parenthood, which may account for the non-significant effect when the female partner has low flexibility and the male partner high flexibility. In sum, the results suggest that among dual earner couples and controlling for relative income, women's access to flexible work arrangements outweighs men's access to flexibility in view of parenthood. Provided that women have access to flexible work arrangements, flexibility in the male partner's employment sector is positive but is not the driving factor when making the decision to have a first child.

Table 2: Logit models of conception leading to a first birth

	Conception leading to a first birth (1) versus no conception (0)					
	Model I		Model II		Model III	
	OR	sig.	OR	sig.	OR	sig.
Constant	0.003	(0.000)	0.005	(0.000)	0.004	(0.000)
Time						
Linear	1.102	(0.000)	1.099	(0.000)	1.099	(0.000)
Quadratic	0.999	(0.000)	0.999	(0.000)	0.999	(0.000)
Level of education (ref. High)						
Low	9.237	(0.000)	8.974	(0.000)	8.943	(0.000)
Middle	5.686	(0.000)	5.607	(0.000)	5.624	(0.000)
Unknown	1.113	(0.677)	1.063	(0.831)	1.062	(0.815)
Education*Quarters since 18 (linear)						
Low	0.911	(0.000)	0.913	(0.000)	0.913	(0.000)
Middle	0.932	(0.000)	0.933	(0.000)	0.933	(0.000)
Unknown	0.986	(0.204)	0.987	(0.258)	0.987	(0.254)
Education*Quarters since 18 (quadratic)						
Low	1.001	(0.000)	1.001	(0.000)	1.001	(0.000)
Middle	1.001	(0.000)	1.001	(0.000)	1.001	(0.000)
Unknown	1.000	(0.512)	1.000	(0.588)	1.000	(0.573)
Household income	1.001	(0.000)	1.001	(0.000)	1.001	(0.000)
Relative income (ref. equal)						
Man higher			0.919	(0.064)	0.921	(0.072)
Woman higher			1.006	(0.906)	1.008	(0.871)

Table 2: (Continued)

	Conception leading to a first birth (1) versus no conception (0)					
	Model I		Model II		Model III	
	OR	sig.	OR	sig.	OR	sig.
Household past employment intensity	1.003	(0.000)	1.003	(0.002)	1.003	(0.002)
Relative past employment intensity (ref. equal)						
Man higher			0.893	(0.026)	0.895	(0.028)
Woman higher			1.090	(0.176)	1.089	(0.180)
Household work percentage	1.003	(0.144)	1.001	(0.714)	1.002	(0.650)
Relative work percentage (ref. equal)						
Man higher			0.985	(0.808)	0.983	(0.777)
Woman higher			0.778	(0.001)	0.750	(0.000)
Relative sector-specific flexibility (ref. both low)						
Woman low, man high flexibility					1.087	(0.087)
Woman high, man low flexibility					1.068	(0.035)
Both high flexibility					1.168	(0.001)
Married (ref. cohabiting)	2.096	(0.000)	2.096	(0.000)	2.096	(0.000)
Migration background couple (ref. Belgian-Belgian)						
Woman 1 st generation - Man 1 st generation	1.215	(0.009)	1.224	(0.008)	1.214	(0.007)
Man 2 nd generation	1.054	(0.014)	1.070	(0.011)	1.068	(0.015)
Man Belgian	0.805	(0.675)	0.833	(0.586)	0.828	(0.598)
Woman 2 nd generation - Man 1 st generation	1.462	(0.002)	1.432	(0.010)	1.440	(0.008)
Man 2 nd generation	1.156	(0.000)	1.157	(0.000)	1.159	(0.000)
Man Belgian	0.991	(0.068)	0.993	(0.067)	0.991	(0.064)
Woman Belgian - Man 1 st generation	1.067	(0.871)	1.046	(0.906)	1.052	(0.879)
Man 2 nd generation	0.944	(0.504)	0.941	(0.642)	0.944	(0.603)
Unknown	0.698	(0.331)	0.696	(0.305)	0.692	(0.325)
Unemployment rate						
Female	0.997	(0.425)	0.997	(0.427)	0.976	(0.395)
Male	0.985	(0.000)	0.984	(0.000)	0.984	(0.000)
Region (ref. Flanders)						
Wallonia	1.227	(0.000)	1.228	(0.000)	1.220	(0.000)
Brussels	0.976	(0.662)	0.979	(0.703)	0.969	(0.566)
N couple quarters	133,130		133,130		133,130	
N couples	13,822		13,822		13,822	

Source: BASD Panel 1999-2010, Authors' calculation

6. Discussion and conclusion

The rising symmetry in public gender roles as a result of women's increasing educational and labour market participation could make the gender distribution of partners' employment characteristics irrelevant with respect to family formation, as long as household levels of financial resources and time availability are sufficient to raise a child. However, several factors seem to challenge this course of events. First, pregnancy and some aspects of nurturing a new-born child (e.g., breastfeeding) are predominantly female matters, and may thus impact the female partner's labour force

participation and resources more profoundly than those of the male partner – at least around the time of childbirth. Furthermore, gender pay gaps have been repeatedly documented, occupational segregation – though diminishing – persists (OECD 2012), and the implementation and uptake of family policies such as parental leave differs strongly between employment sectors and remains strongly gendered (Wood, Kil, and Marynissen 2018). As a result, gender differentials in access to resources and flexibility in terms of work regimes have persisted at the household level, which in turn continues to provide an economic rationale for gendered associations between partners' labour market positions and the transition to parenthood. In addition, the link between partners' labour market positions and the decision to have a first child may also differ by gender in the context of gendered (parenting) norms. Using detailed longitudinal register data, this paper examines the link between dual earners' relative employment characteristics and the transition to parenthood in Belgium to determine whether these associations are (still) gendered.

Our results show both gendered and gender-insensitive patterns. In contrast to findings for the Netherlands (Begall 2013) and Italy (Vignoli, Drefahl, and De Santis 2012), the relative distribution of income between partners is not related to the transition to parenthood, suggesting that the responsibility to provide financial resources is no longer gendered among dual earner couples in Belgium (confirming Hypothesis 1b in terms of income). Hence, there is no indication of gender role specialisation or traditional male breadwinner norms with respect to the provision of financial resources. Furthermore, the female partner having a low(er) past employment intensity than her partner is negatively associated with couples' first birth hazards, which does not confirm either Hypothesis 1a or 1b and is not in line with findings for Italy (Vignoli, Drefahl, and De Santis 2012) and Britain (Inanc 2015). Thus, at first sight, there seem to be no indications of either gender role specialisation or gender-neutral associations between partners' job stability and the transition to parenthood. However, as women have lower job stability, future access to flexible work arrangements (e.g., parental leave) may be uncertain. Hence, this finding suggests that job stability may be more closely associated with flexible work regimes and time availability than with income, at least in our sample of dual earners in Belgium. This would also be consistent with our hypotheses and findings for work percentage and sector-specific access to flexible work arrangements: controlling for income differences between partners, women's higher work percentage is negatively related to the transition to parenthood. This gendered effect is in line with expectations based on the persistence of traditional gender norms and higher opportunity costs of the transition to parenthood for women, and suggests that the female partner's time availability is still of primary importance in view of the transition to parenthood, thus confirming Hypothesis 2a in terms of working hours. Thus, when the female partner works more, couples seem

to be less inclined to make the transition to parenthood. Finally, flexibility in both partners' employment sectors is positively associated with the transition to parenthood, which seems to confirm Hypothesis 2b in terms of flexibility. However, the positive link between flexibility at work and parenthood is more articulated in couples where the female partner has high and the male partner low flexibility than in couples where the female partner has low and the male partner high flexibility. As a result, particularly high flexibility in the female partner's employment sector – and thus her possibility of having or making time to care for a child – is positively associated with the transition to parenthood (confirming Hypothesis 2a).

Overall, our results suggest that there is a shift away from a traditionally gendered fulfilment of labour market preconditions to parenthood in dual earner couples, but not unambiguously towards gender-neutral patterns. Particularly the time availability and access to flexible work regimes of the female partner rather than the male partner are related to couples' transition to parenthood. By contrast, the effect of income seems to have become gender-neutral. These results may be strongly related to the institutional context of Belgium: Belgium exhibits extensive work–family policies that encourage continued labour force participation of both parents over the transition to parenthood (e.g., subsidized outsourcing of household and childcare tasks and parental leave schemes), making female wage-earning and parenthood compatible. On the other hand, the high gender gap in (especially part-time) employment, gender segregation in employment sectors, and the explicitly genderizing nature of Belgian parental leave policies imply that childcare is still largely considered a female responsibility – hence the importance of the female partner's (access to) time availability.

Finally, we identify several limitations that suggest avenues for future research. First, the results of this study may be biased by self-selection mechanisms. More family-oriented individuals or couples may self-select into labour market positions that they consider favourable to making the transition to parenthood, e.g., moving into employment sectors with high levels of flexibility, positions with fewer working hours, higher wages, etc. in view of parenthood. Possible self-selection of childbearing-prone individuals or couples into flexible employment sectors, for example, does not imply that the positive association found between flexibility and the transition to parenthood is spurious. However, it does imply that this positive association is not necessarily a causal one. Thus, if men or women self-select into flexible employment sectors to subsequently make the transition to parenthood there is a genuine – though not a causal – positive association between sector-specific flexibility and parenthood. Second, although the dataset at hand entails detailed longitudinal microdata on both partners of a couple, it has several limitations with respect to variable availability. The lack of information on (the male partner's) level of education, women's age at union formation, and type of contract are disadvantages. Level of education has been shown to be related

to both labour market positions and attitudes. To the extent that level of education can be used as a proxy for these factors, missing information on the male partner's education may lead to omitted variable bias. However, by looking at the relative distribution of employment characteristics – such as income and work percentage – within couples, we do capture labour market aspects of gender inequality that would also be captured by partners' (relative) level of education. The missing information on education, however, does prohibit us from using it as a proxy for attitudinal features such as gender norms, which we do not measure directly. Furthermore, information on the possibility of working from home would complete our sector-specific flexibility measures. Also, direct information on partners' gender attitudes would be of particular interest in view of normative explanations of the gendered association between partners' employment characteristics and the transition to parenthood. Future research using even more detailed quantitative data or taking a qualitative approach could overcome these limitations.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes significantly to the literature. By effectively examining the association between the relative distribution of a broad array of dual earners' employment characteristics and the transition to parenthood in Belgium, it addresses the to date understudied couple dynamics in the link between employment characteristics and fertility, and in particular its gendered nature. In view of completing the gender revolution in both public and private domains, continued research on couple and gender dynamics in the employment–parenthood link deserves the interest of both academics and policymakers.

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