

Gender Norms and Female Labour Supply

Evidence from Intergenerational and Partner Channels in the UK

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Introduction

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Labour market context:

- In the UK in 2024, employment among men aged 16–64 was 77.7%, compared with 71.9% among women: a gap of around 6 percentage points.
- Women remain less likely to work full-time, supply fewer hours, and have less career mobility.
- Denmark: While earnings inequality has halved, the proportion of inequality explained by parenthood has doubled (Kleven et al., 2019).

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Motivation: If formal labour market opportunities have expanded, why do gender gaps in participation, hours, and work intensity persist?

Research Question

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We examine two channels:

- **Individual-level mechanism:** do women's own gender norms affect employment, full-time work, and hours?
- **Partner-level mechanism:** do the gender norm attitudes of women's male partners independently affect their employment participation?

Theoretical Motivation and Previous Findings

Why might norms matter?

Standard household models frame labour supply as a market/home-production trade-off, but gender norms may constrain how freely individuals make this choice.

- Becker (1965, 1991): intra-household specialisation may arise from comparative advantage.
- Mincer (1962): this market/home-production trade-off is especially binding for married women.
- Coleman (1990): norms become behaviourally binding through internal and external sanctions.

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What does the empirical literature show?

- **Intergenerational transmission:** parent-child gender-role views are strongly correlated, and those raised by working mothers are more egalitarian (Burt and Scott, 2002; Wright and Young, 1998).
- **Male norm formation:** sons exposed to working mothers are more likely to prefer working wives (Farré and Vella, 2013).

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Norms are shaped by maternal employment during childhood and transmitted across generations

Empirical Challenge and Identification Strategy

Empirical challenge

Gender norms and labour supply may be jointly determined: norms shape work decisions, but work and household roles may also reshape reported attitudes.

- Workplace exposure may make individuals more egalitarian.
- Home production may lead individuals to rationalise traditional roles.
- Partners may sort into relationships based on shared expectations.

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Identification strategy

We use maternal employment during adolescence as an instrument for adult gender norms.

Mother worked $\longrightarrow$ Egalitarian norms $\longrightarrow$ Higher labour supply

Mother worked $\nrightarrow$ Higher labour supply directly

- Maternal employment predicts adult norms through intergenerational transmission.
- Conditional on norms and controls, maternal employment should not directly affect adult labour supply.

This helps isolate variation in gender norms formed before adult labour market behaviour is observed.

We use harmonised longitudinal survey data from:

- **British Household Panel Survey (BHPS):** 1991–2008.
- **Understanding Society / UKHLS:** 2009–2023.

Labour supply outcomes:

- Employment participation; Full-time employment status; Weekly hours worked.

Gender norm attitudes:

- “A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works.”
- “All in all, family life suffers when a woman has a full-time job.”

Instrument:

- Maternal employment status when the respondent was aged 14.

Dataset use:

- BHPS estimates women’s own norm effects; UKHLS enables partner-linked analysis.

Empirical Framework

OLS specification:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta G_{it} + X_{it}\gamma + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (1)$$

First stage:

$$G_{it} = \pi + \delta Z_i + X_{it}\rho + u_{it} \quad (2)$$

Exclusion restriction check:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \theta Z_i + \beta G_{it} + X_{it}\gamma + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (3)$$

2SLS specification:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \beta \hat{G}_{it} + X_{it}\gamma + \varepsilon_{it} \quad (4)$$

Individual-level mechanism

- Y_{it} : employment outcome
- G_{it} : woman's own traditional gender norm
- Z_i : maternal work status as child
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- Z_i : maternal work status as child
- X_{it} : controls for personal characteristics

Partner-level mechanism

- G_{it}^p : male partner's traditional gender norm
- Z_i^p : partner's maternal work status as child
- X_{it}' : additional controls for partner characteristics

Individual-level mechanism

Outcome	OLS	IV / 2SLS
Employment participation	-0.141***	-0.195***
Full-time employment	-0.168***	-0.340**
Log weekly hours	-0.094***	-0.199**

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Interpretation:

- **Individual-level mechanism:** women's own traditional norms significantly reduce employment, full-time work, and hours supplied.

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- **Individual-level mechanism:** women's own traditional norms significantly reduce employment, full-time work, and hours supplied.
- **Partner-level mechanism:** male partners' traditional norms independently reduce women's employment participation.
- **Intergenerational mechanism:** maternal employment significantly predicts adult gender norms.

Concluding Remarks

Key takeaway

- Traditional gender norms significantly reduce women's labour supply, operating both through women's own beliefs and independently through male partners' beliefs.

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- UK parental leave policy may preserve these roles: fathers receive only a short separate entitlement, while longer shared leave is largely drawn from mothers' unused maternity leave.

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Policy direction

- Reserved, well-paid "use-it-or-lose-it" paternal leave quotas could help shift caregiving norms and reduce persistent gender inequality.

Remove constraints. Reveal preferences.

Thank you

Questions?