

Are step families' couples more egalitarian? Gender gap in labor market participation in a cross national perspective

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The aim of this paper is to analyze whether couples of step-families have more gender-egalitarian relationships than other couples. The analysis focuses on gender gaps in labor market participation of both types of couples in a cross national perspective. Homogeneity patterns in couples' participation in the labour market are viewed as an indicator of gender equality. Do step-families' couples show higher homogeneity patterns in labor market participation than non step-families' couples?.

The recent increase of step families in most industrialized countries has typically been linked with the increase of out-of-wedlock childbearing and union instability (Goldscheider and Sasser, 2006). These tendencies, together with delayed fertility, increase of cohabiting couples and the increase of single living have been interpreted under the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) as interrelated tendencies that are rooted in a new family model: "The individualistic family model" (Van de Kaa, D; 2004). The importance of ideational changes in bringing these tendencies has also been pointed out by different authors (see Billari and Liebroer, 2004; Fokkema and Liebroer). These ideational changes have been linked to the importance of individual autonomy and self-realisation, but it has been

pointed out that their impact has been greater for women and that their consequences have been more far-reaching in countries with more egalitarian gender structures (Bernhardt, 2004).

These changes in family formation patterns are intimately related to the respective increase and decrease of female and male participation in the labor market, thus leading to a decrease of the gender gap in labor market participation in most industrialized countries. However, international comparisons of female labor participation rates in industrialized countries show that gender differences cannot be exclusively explained by classical offer and demand theories, so that differences in the existing social norms and institutional contexts still play a crucial role (see Fitzenberger, Schnabel and Wunderlich; 2004). However, these macro mechanisms are not the only ones explaining the differences in labor participation: some studies show important differences in women labor participation across home country groups that can only be explained by cultural differences between these groups regarding family structure and women's role in market vs home work (Antecol, 2000). This way, one would expect a higher labor participation among step-family couples after controlling for other contextual variables.

On the one hand, women participation in the labor market may be negotiated differently within each type of couple, particularly in countries where stepfamilies are not yet widespread and represent a selective family type; however, as it becomes more popular across social groups, differences between the sociodemographic profile of these two types of couples may become less discernible in shaping couples's model of labour market participation. On the other hand, there is a large literature on remarriage that focuses on age as a central analytical focus showing that repartnering is associated with different marriage markets and that the pool of possible partners is strongly linked with age, specially for women. This way, step-family couples are considered to be more heterogamic because of the limitations of a secondary marriage market (Cortina, 2008; Skew, 2009). In the same

line, one would expect to find higher heterogamy among the members of step-family couples regarding the labor participation patterns.

In this framework we posit two hypothesis:

Restrictive Hypothesis:

Even if individuals prefer to pair off with other individuals with similar characteristics regarding age and education, the restrictions of the secondary marriage market make these preferences more difficult to be fulfilled, so step-family couples tend to be more heterogeneous regarding the age and education profile. These differences are often translated into higher power differences and thus would make higher differences into market labor participation among step-family couples than is otherwise observed among non step-family couples.

Learning and selective hypothesis:

Step-family spouses come from a personal and social crisis process that determine a highly reflective attitude when defining new strategies to find another partner. Having learnt from previous experiences, these individuals readjust their relational preferences and might negotiate for more gender egalitarian relationships. According to social learning theory, individuals restructuring gender role specialization are less likely to show conformity to traditional gender roles and thus less gender gap in market labor participation.

Using harmonized census microdata for eight european countries from the IPUMS-International Website, this paper raises this question in order to discuss if this new type of couples show evidence of higher gender equity levels. The selected countries have different degrees of step-families' diffusion, they have different institutional contexts and prevailing gender values. Descriptive analysis and multilevel multivariable modelling (multilevel logistic regression analysis) are used to get a better understanding of the differences in gendered labor patterns between women in step and non step-family couples. The key

question, however, is whether couples in step-families are a distinct group due to composition effects or due to their higher expectations of individual autonomy and gender equality.

This is a relevant question because extended families are becoming an increasingly widespread option for organizing family life and because most studies focusing on this type of family have emphasized that extended families might have negative effects on children's wellbeing. If children acquire gender roles by imitating role models, higher gender equality among step-families' couples would point towards a more positive picture for its implications for children's well-being.

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