It’s not just who you marry but also where you live! Determinants of working time differences within couples in Europe

This paper deals with the determinants of differences in working hours between men and women in Europe. Working hour differences between men and women are an important – though under-researched – indicator of social inequality. Large differences in working hours in paid employment reinforce gender inequalities in income (Rosenfeld & Kalleberg, 1990; Waldfogel, 1998), the speed of career advancement (Maume, 1999), and the division of household duties (Brines, 1993; Casper & Bianchi, 2002; Dex, 2004; Heisig, 2011). Although an unequal distribution in working hours between men and women in general and within couples in particular can be observed almost everywhere in the world, the differences between men’s and women’s working hours vary widely across countries (Hilgemann, 2007).

Based on an analysis of 2008 data from the European Labor Force Survey that we linked with macro-level indicators on economic conditions, labor market policies, and gender attitudes, the paper sheds light on the most important individual, household, and country-level characteristics that explain working hour differences within couples in 22 EU countries. We choose to focus on the year 2008 and not a more recent year so that our results are not driven by effects of the economic crisis. The countries in our analyses are Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Spain, and the United Kingdom.¹

Our dependent variable is the female partner’s working hours as a proportion of the couple’s total working hours. This means that our variable can range from 0 (no contribution to the couple’s total working hours) to 100 (exclusive contribution to the couple’s total working hours). As a robustness check, we also assess the working-hour gap within couples with the absolute difference in hours worked per week between the two.

¹ Data from Germany is based on the German „Mikrozensus“ which have been made comparable based on the EU LFS’ common coding scheme.
The two central findings our multilevel analyses are that we need to consider formal as well as informal institutions in order to explain working hour differences within couples and that institutions do not have a uniform effect on all types of couples. More specifically, we find that

- the positive relationship between of childcare coverage for children under 3 years and women’s contribution to the total number of working hours within the couple disappears once we adjust our models for the prevalence of traditional gender norms in a country.
- The prevalence of traditional gender norms is particularly relevant for the working time arrangements of couples in which the female partner works in a job of lower occupational status than the male partner.
- For couples in which the female partner works in a job of higher occupational status than the male partner, however, we can show a positive, statistically significant association between childcare care coverage and women’s working hours even after adjusting our models for traditional gender norms.