Gender Equality in the Family and Childbearing over the Life Course

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Developed countries have been moving towards greater gender equality, with mixed effects on fertility. It has been argued that a gap between high levels of societal gender equality, in particular in employment, and low levels of gender equality within the family produces a double burden on women. This burden puts families under pressure and may limit their fertility (Goldscheider et al. 2010; McDonald 2000). By contrast, high levels of gender equality in both society and in households may encourage fertility.

We investigate the relationship between gender equality and equity in the family and childbearing in Norway across the life course. Our analysis is uniquely comprehensive in four ways: First, we take a life course perspective that focuses on the timing of childbearing of couples in different stages in their life course, specifically couples with no children, one child, and two children. Second, we examine actual births, rather than intentions. Third, we focus on both housework and childcare, two distinct aspects of household labor. Fourth, we include not only equality in the division of housework and childcare, but also equity, the perception of whether the division is fair and just. To do this, we use a unique dataset where we combine data from the Norwegian Generations and Gender Survey in 2007 with information from the Norwegian administrative register on subsequent childbirths, meaning that we have longitudinal birth histories after the survey for the entire original sample.

Background

Life course. The childbearing of couples at different points in their life course may be affected differently by gender equity and equality. A lifecourse perspective emphasizes the importance of timing of events. The first birth is a particularly important event in any lifecourse, and the timing of the first birth is linked to life outcomes such as the likelihood and timing of subsequent births (Kaharuza, Sabroe & Basso 2001; Nabukera et al 2009; Rao & Balakrishnan 1989; Yamaguchi & Ferguson 1995).

The timing of a second birth is also important. One major issue is health and fecundity. When births are spaced too closely together, there is a potential for adverse effects for the pregnancy, birth, mother's health, and child's development (Zhu et al. 1999). For mothers who are older at the time of the first birth, however, declining fecundity means that they have a relatively smaller window in which to have a second or third birth (Nabukera et al. 2009). Another major issue is employment. It has been theorized that women who face a greater opportunity cost by having children may use shorter birth intervals to overcome this (Taniguchi, 1999). On the other hand, it has also been suggested that longer birth intervals may allow for less career interruption (Bumpass & Sweet, 1980). The impact of spacing on employment will certainly be influenced by parental leave policy. Another important factor may be how the parents distribute household and caregiving responsibilities. For example, a woman with a very involved partner may be able to have a wider space between births because by sharing the labor

the partners minimize the impact of childbearing on her employment trajectory. By contrast, for a woman who takes on most of the burden of household and childcare, a shorter birth interval allows her to consolidate the time she spends on childrearing and thus to minimize the impact of childbearing on her employment trajectory.

No prior study has yet compared how the division of labor might affect births across the life course. Studies which focused on intentions did find that the division of household labor is much more important to those with children than to those without children (Mills et al. 2008; Neyer et al. 2011). This finding hints that there may indeed be differences in how equity impacts couples childbearing at different parities.

Household labor. Both housework and care of children are key aspects of the division of household labor, but they may be perceived differently by couples at different points in the life course. The involvement of Norwegian men in the care of children has been increasing more rapidly than their participation in housework. As women still use about the same time for care as 30 years ago, this means that the total amount of provided care has increased (Kitterød 2012). This may be because involvement with children has risen in status and is more highly valued. In contrast to this the total amount of housework decreased and particularly women do less housework today than 30 years ago in Norway. But even though men take a higher share of housework today, women still do most (Kitterød 2012, Kitterød & Pettersen 2006). For couples without children, housework may be their best indicator for a potential division of childcare. Couples with children, by contrast, have already experienced the division of childcare with their partner and will be using this experience as they consider further children.

Research examining housework and childcare consistently finds that it has an impact on childbearing and intentions. When housework is shared, couples are more likely to intend a(nother) child and to transition more rapidly to a second child (Buber 2002; Mencarini & Tanturri 2005; Mills et al. 2008; Oláh 2003; Tazi-Preve et al. 2008; Torr & Short 2004). For childcare, intentions for another child are higher and the likelihood of having another child is greater when fathers are more involved (Brodmann et al. 2007; Cooke 2009; Duvander et al. 2010; Fiori 2009; Kotila & Camp Dush 2011; Neyer et al. 2011; Pinelli & Fiori 2008). These studies provide promising evidence, although they do not examine couples across the life course.

Further, most prior research has examined housework and childcare separately, meaning that the question which has yet to be fully resolved is whether or not the division of housework and childcare have differing effects on fertility. The few studies which have compared housework and childcare suggest that both are important, but that shared childcare may have a stronger effect on fertility intentions than shared housework (Buber 2002; Neyer et al. 2011). These studies have not examined actual births, however. This study thus extends prior research by comparing the division of housework with the division of childcare for couples across parities and by examining effects on actual childbearing.

Equity and equality. Partners' perceptions of the equity or fairness of the division of household labor may be at least as important as the equality of the division (Fraser 1994, McDonald 2000). This idea suggests that divisions of household labor and childcare might be practiced unequal but as long as such a practice is perceived as equitable and fair it may not restrict childbearing.

The effects of equity on fertility were explored by Bernhardt & Goldscheider (2008) by contrasting long-held attitudes about the division of labor with the reality of housework and childcare when children arrived. They found that, indeed, a clash between expectations and reality resulted in lower chances of having another child. By contrast, those couples with unequal divisions of labor were just as likely as those with equal divisions to have another child if they had expected the inequality; that is, if they viewed it as equitable.

In a study which compared equality and equity of housework and their effects on intentions for a(nother) child, effects differed by parity and gender (Neyer et al. 2011). For those with no children, neither equity nor equality of the division of housework had an influence on their childbearing intentions. However, for parents the division of housework impacted intentions for another child. For mothers, equality was most important, whereas for fathers equity mattered more. For the division of childcare, both mothers and fathers are more likely to intend another child if they perceive the division as equitable. Fathers and mothers of two children are also more likely to intend another if they have an equal division of childcare. Buber (2002) also compared equity and equality in childcare, and found that greater equity increased the likelihood of Austrian mothers' intentions for a second child. However, this study found smaller effects for equity than for equality.

This study follows others in using satisfaction with the division of household labor as an indicator of equity (i.e. Buber 2002; Neyer et al 2011). Being satisfied with the division of work is not the same as the perception of fairness, but satisfaction proxies fairness by assuming that people would not be satisfied with the division if they perceived the division as unfair and unjust.

Thus, the perception of equity in the division of labor may be at least as important as the actual equality of the division of labor. Most prior research examining the division of labor has focused on equality and has not included equity. This study extends prior research by comparing the effects of equity and equality on actual births.

Egalitarian beliefs. In addition to perceptions of equity, fertility may also be influenced by the values or beliefs held by individuals. Puur et al. (2008) examined eight European countries and found that fertility intentions were higher for men who held more egalitarian beliefs about division of household labor. This relationship was further tested in Finland, where a curvilinear relationship was found, such that men with more traditional and more egalitarian gender beliefs both were more likely to intend children, and to intend higher numbers of children, than men with intermediate gender beliefs (Miettinen 2011). These studies focused on intentions; analyses of actual births and gender beliefs did not examine gender at the household level (Westoff & Higgins 2009, Goldscheider et al 2010). Our study thus is able to consider the effect of household-level gender role beliefs on births across the life course.

Women and men. The views of both men and women are important to consider, because in developed countries both men and women have input into childbearing decisions (Thomson 1997; Thomson & Hoem 1998; Jansen & Liefbroer 2006; Miller & Pasta 1995). This study includes both women's and men's reports. Although women and men may perceive equity and equality of housework and childcare differently, we would not expect this to have differential effects on childbearing because this is a shared event; that is, each childbearing decision is made by a couple composed of a woman and a man.

Norwegian context. Although Norway is found on the upper end of the gender equality scale, its social equality is more advanced than its household equality. Over the last decade there has been a strong gender equal discourse at the societal level and the aim of gender equality has been implemented in family policy programs directed at families with young children. Public childcare is widely available and usually children start in kindergarten when they turn one year old and also schools provide full time care. From this perspective, the necessity for childcare comparatively low. Despite this, many mothers are employed part-time and mothers continue to perform a larger share of household labor (Kitterød & Pettersen 2006). This provides a context in which equality and equity in the division of household labor can exert an influence on fertility (Neyer et al. 2011).

Data and methods

We use data from Norwegian Gender and Generations Survey (GGS) conducted in 2007 (Vikat et al. 2007) and subsequent birth histories from administrative registers until August 2011. The Norwegian GGS is a nationally representative survey, with a response rate of 60% for the telephone interview. The final dataset comprises 14,892 respondents (Lappegård & Veenstra 2010). The survey includes several measures about the household and family situation, including the share of household and childcare tasks and the satisfaction with these arrangements. In addition to the information retained directly from the respondent, the Norwegian GGS is based on individual level data from different administrative registers, e.g. civil status or highest level of education. Such linking of data is facilitated by a system of universal ID numbers (Røed & Raaum, 2003). As also births are reported to the Population register, it was possible to keep track of the childbearing of all respondents based on this system. This means that our data do not suffer under the usual problem of attrition in panel data, when we analyze childbearing behavior after the data collection in 2007.

The here selected sample includes men and women with co-resident partners where the female partner was aged 18-40 years at the time of the interview who were physically able to have children, but currently not pregnant. The couples had no children, one child or two children when one of them was interviewed in 2007. Among the parents, only those with common children are included in our sample and the youngest child was aged three years or younger at the time of the interview. Our selected sample consists of 1,540 individuals (see Table 1 for an overview over the dataset and the dependent and independent variables).

The time until a(nother) birth after the interview is the dependent variable in our analysis. We included births within 36 months (3 years) after the interview for all respondents. This means that every respondent had the same time window for a(nother) birth after the interview in 2007. If and how gender equality and equity haven an impact on childbearing is the main research question of this paper. Therefore we focus on the effect of up to five explanatory variables connected to this question.

Looking at the actual division of labor of he couple, we included both a measure for housework and childcare. The variable indicating the division of housework was based on four different housework tasks: cooking, doing the dishes, shopping for food and cleaning the dwelling. For each item respondents were asked who usually does the task. Each task was then coded by us as having either an *unbalanced* or *balanced* division where *unbalanced* means the female partner does most of the task *and balanced* means the partners share the task equally. Due to small numbers, men doing most of the task was also coded as balanced. Couples were coded according to the number of tasks which had a balanced division of labor, either 0-1 tasks, 2-3 tasks, or all 4 tasks, where the latter represents a high level of gender equality in the division of housework.

We included a similar measurement for the division of childcare among parents with one or two children. Also this variable is based on four specific tasks and how the couple divided them: responsibility for dressing the children, putting the children to bed, staying at home with the children when they are ill, and playing with the children and/or taking part in leisure activities with them. We coded division of childcare in the same way as the variable for the division of housework and separate between three levels of division of childcare tasks (0-1 task balanced, 2-3 tasks balanced, all 4 task balanced).

As an indicator of equity this study uses satisfaction with the division of labor. For both the division of household tasks and the division of childcare tasks, the respondents were asked to which degree they were satisfied with the described division of labor in these two areas. The answering scales for these variables reached from 0 to 10 where 10 indicated ‘very satisfied’ with the division. We grouped respondents by whether they perceived this division as fair (7-10) or unfair (0-6). Satisfaction with division of housework and satisfaction with division of childcare were both coded in this way. In both cases, the group of the unsatisfied comprises about 10 to 15% of the sample (see Table 1).

To evaluate the possible importance egalitarian beliefs on gender roles in housework and childcare, we included a variable that is based on the question: "Preschool children suffer if their mother is employed". Respondents could agree or disagree to this statement on a five point scale. Those disagreeing to the statement (values 4 or 5) were coded as expressing egalitarian beliefs. Those agreeing (values 1 or 2) or neither agreeing or disagreeing (value 3), were coded as expressing less egalitarian beliefs and thereby less egalitarian gender roles. In contrast to the other variables, this item was evaluated in a self-administrated paper survey in the Norwegian GGS, which had a lower response rate (43%) than the telephone survey. Missing values were imputed based on respondent's sex, highest level of education and age.

In addition to the explanatory variables, we controlled for background variables that are usually used in analysis of childbearing. This includes woman's age, the age difference between the couple, marital status, union duration, and level of education and employment situation of the partners. We also controlled for the sex of the respondent and among parents we included the age of the youngest child (or the time since last birth) in our models.

We used event history analysis to study the effect of gender equality and equity on the time until a(nother) birth. Based on life-tables we first describe the timing of childbearing for the three types of couples, representing different stage in the life course: without children, with one child and two children. In a second step, we run Cox regression models (proportional hazard models) to estimate the effect of the explanatory variables on the tempo of childbearing in the subsequent 36 months after the interview. Also these models were run separately by parity.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the dataset and applied variables

	No Children	One child	Two children
Birth of a(nother) child within 3 years	37%	64%	22%
Division of housework			
0-1 tasks balanced	13%	22%	25%
2-3 tasks balanced	53%	57%	59%
4 tasks balanced	34%	21%	16%
Division of childcare			
0-1 tasks balanced		16%	8%
2-3 tasks balanced		51%	50%
4 tasks balanced		33%	43%
Satisfied with division of housework	89%	88%	85%
Satisfied with division of childcare		91%	92%
Less egalitarian gender role beliefs	31%	31%	27%
Respondent is a women	53%	52%	48%
Couple is married (vs. cohabitation)	22%	46%	66%
Mean duration of union in years	3,9	5,6	8,6
Mean age difference between partners	-0,34	-0,27	-0,37
Her age at the interview			
18-25 years	39%	19%	6%
26-30 years	34%	37%	27%
31-35 years	20%	34%	45%
36-40 years	8%	11%	22%
Her highest level of education			
Compulsory education	11%	17%	9%
Secondary education	34%	32%	33%
Tertiary education	56%	51%	59%
His highest level of education			
Compulsory education	12%	11%	9%
Secondary education	41%	44%	46%
Tertiary education	47%	45%	45%
Her employment situation			
Full-time employment	62%	38%	39%
Part-time employment	13%	21%	26%
On maternal leave	0	24%	22%
Other (homemaker, under education, …)	25%	18%	14%
He working full time (vs. other)	76%	80%	86%
Age of youngest child			
0 years		32%	28%
1 year		30%	25%
2 years		26%	27%
3 years		12%	20%
N (% of total)	692 (45%)	349 (23%)	499 32%)

Source: Norwegian GGS 2007, own calculations.

Preliminary results

Table 1 shows that the division of housework was moderately balanced (sharing 2-3 tasks) for over 50% of all couples. The highest proportion of couples who equally shared all four household tasks is found among the childless. By contrast more couples with children than without children have had a very unbalanced division of housework, in the sense that men were less involved in housework here. Involvement of men is slightly higher among those with one child compared to those with two children. Regardless of number of children, over four fifths of respondents were satisfied with their division of housework, e.g. perceiving it as fair or equitable. The group that expressed dissatisfaction with the division of housework is lowest among the childless respondents and highest among those with two children. The increasing amount of housework in a bigger household might be one reason for this difference.

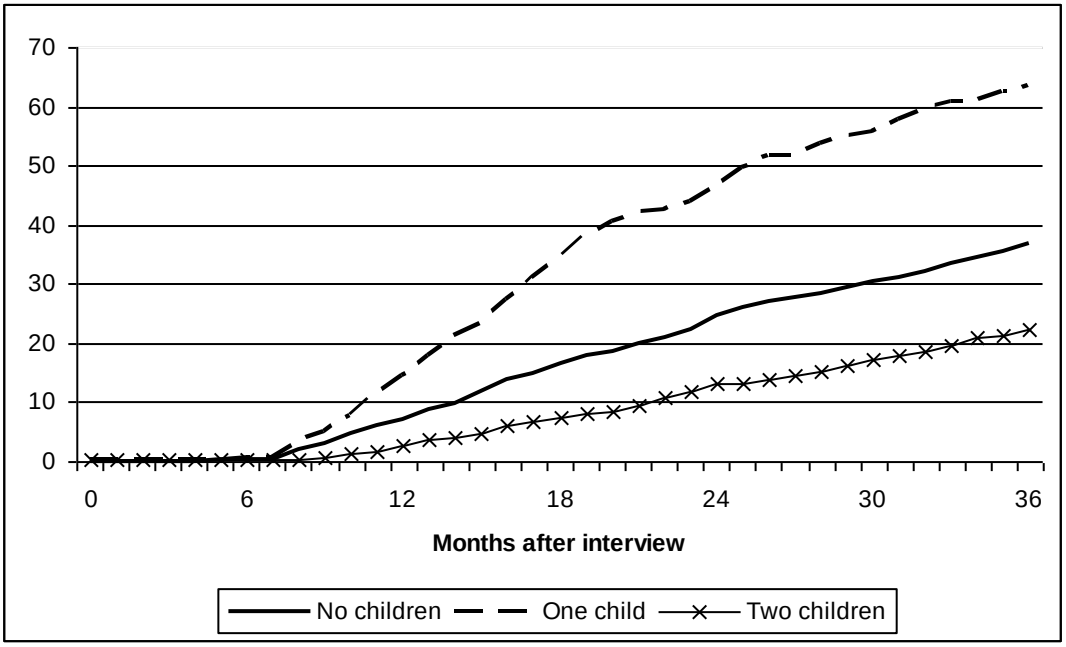
As with housework, about half of all couples with children had a moderately balanced division of childcare. In contrast to the division of housework, we found the highest share with a very unbalanced division of childcare among parents with one child and not among those with two children. Over 40% of parents with two children stated that they shared all four childcare tasks equally, while this was only true among a third of parents with one child. This result might reflect the necessity of a higher involvement of fathers when there are two children instead of one to take care of.

When it comes to satisfaction with the division of this child related tasks, only about 10% of the parents expressed that they are not satisfied with their arrangement, e.g. do not perceive equity. Here the difference between those with one and two children was marginal. Beside the more equal share, childcare might also be perceived as a more fulfilling activity than housework.

About 30% of the respondents expressed less egalitarian gender beliefs by not disagreeing to the statement that pre-school children suffer when mother works. Over two thirds of all respondents disagreed to this statement. The highest level of disagreement or egalitarian gender values was found among couples with two children (73%), compared to 69% among one child parents and childless respondents.

Looking at the other independent variables, Table 1 shows that the dataset includes slightly more women than men. When comparing the childless with the parents (with either one child or two children) we find only weak differences in the highest level of education of the couples. Other variables vary as expected among the three groups: Parents were more often married than couples without children; they had in average stayed together longer and were older. In line with this age differences, men without a child were less often full time employed at the time of the interview. Among women, full time employment decreases and part-time employment increases when they have children.

Figure 1: Time until birth of a(nother) child after the interview by parity



Source: Norwegian GGS 2007, own calculations.

In Figure 1 we take a first look at the differences in the timing of childbearing between the three groups. The curves retrieved form life-table calculations display the time until a birth after the interview and the cumulative percentage of respondents with a birth. As only respondents and couples that were not pregnant at the time of the interview were included in our sample, we recorded only very few births within the first nine months of the time window. From that point on, the curve for parents with one child is increasing steadily and stronger than the two other groups (no children and two children at the interview). By the end of the period, the majority (64%) of the former one child parents made the transition to a two child family. The same is true for 37% of former non-parents, while 22% made the transition from a two to a three child family within three years after the interview. This picture is in line with earlier findings, showing that comparatively few proceed form two to three children in Norway (Lappegård 2000). To test how gender equality and equity influence the childbearing process in these different life stages, we ran proportional hazard models. The results for these models are displayed in Table 2.

The results from these preliminary models indicate that effects of the division of household labor on fertility differ by parity. Couples who were without children at the interview have a higher tempo of childbearing when they expressed a moderately balanced division of housework, compared to couples with a highly balanced division of housework. For those with one or two children, neither division of housework nor the daily division of childcare influenced childbearing.

The satisfaction with the division of housework and childcare was, as shown in Table 1, generally high among the couples in each of the three life stages. But only for couples with one child, the satisfaction with the division of childcare had a significant impact on the timing of a subsequent birth. Those expressing that they were satisfied with the division of housework had a 137% higher chance (hazard) for a subsequent birth compared to those not expiring equity. Satisfaction with division of housework or childcare had no effect for the timing of the transition from a two children to a three children family.

Based on a question evaluating the possible conflict between work and childcare for mothers, we included a measure for the value given to gender equality. Expressing a less egalitarian gender role belief had a positive significant impact on subsequent births among those originally without children. Or in other words, respondents with more egalitarian gender role values had a lower chance to become

parents for the first time. Among those with two children, the hazard ratio peaks in the same direction, but the effect is not significant in the complete model where we control for all background variables. In a model were only the main explanatory variables are included the hazard ratio (1,40) is significant on the 0.10 level. In addition to the displayed models, we ran additional models with interaction effects to test possible interactions between the practiced division of labor (balanced or unbalanced) and the satisfaction with this division. These models did not provide any new significant results.

Discussion

There is comparatively little research on the impact of the division of housework and childcare or the perceived equity with the couples' practice of these tasks on childbearing. Previous results provide some evidence that both equality and equity have a positive impact on fertility intentions and that their effect varies across the life course.

Based on survey data from Norway where we were able to follow up the childbearing behavior of the complete sample, we analyzed the impact of gender equality and equity in the family on childbearing for couples without children, one child and two children. Our preliminary results indicate that the division of labor within the family has distinct influences on fertility at different points in the life course.

Gender equality appears to be more important than equity for those with no children. Our results indicate that couples where men contribute partly to the household have a significant higher chance to become parents for the first time compared to couples where men and women share all tasks equally. In line with this, also those with less egalitarian gender role values made the transition to parenthood faster than those with egalitarian values. This might reflect that couples with highly egalitarian values and practices have a lower family orientation, or find it difficult to make the transition to parenthood, as they know that they might have to give up their high equal share when they first have to combine work and childcare.
This finding reflects research by Mills et al. (2008) which found that unequal division of housework did not decrease the childbearing intentions of childless couples. That moderately-sharing couples are more likely to actually bear children than couples who share most equally could help shed light on the consistent finding that the division of household labor is less-equal among parents than nonparents. Part of this is that formerly-equal couples take on more traditional roles after a child arrives (Cowan & Cowan 2000), but another part may be a selection effect. Less-equal couples are more likely to select themselves into parenthood. Further childbearing may be a different situation, as Torr and Short (2004) found second births least likely for those with moderately egalitarian division of housework, compared to those with very equal or very unequal divisions.

Equity on the level of childcare seems to have a positive effect on the transition from a one to a two child family. It is remarkable that neither the actual division of housework nor the actual division of childcare had a significant effect on childbearing, which may indicate that intentions do not necessarily correspond to behavior (Brodmann et al 2007, Buber2002, Neyer et al. 2011).
The result that perceived equity of childcare has a positive effect for subsequent childbearing of one child parents is in line with the hypotheses of Fraser (1994) and McDonald (2000). They point out that as long as the practiced division is perceived as equitable and fair, an unequal patter might not restrict childbearing.

Comparatively few couples make the transition from a two to a three child family in Norway. Here it is no longer the division of household or childcare or the perceived equity that has a substantial influence, but rather strong family preferences. Those who agreed that pre-school children would suffer if the mother works had a higher hazard ratio for a third birth compared to those with more egalitarian gender role beliefs.

Transitions to a first, second, and third birth appear to be very different processes, underscoring the need to take a lifecourse approach in examining them. Our research also highlighted the importance of considering both equality and equity in the division of labor, as equity may be particularly salient to parents.

Table 2: Proportional hazard models for subsequent childbirth within 36 months by number of children at the interview: Hazard ratio (standard error)

	No children	One child	Two children
Division of housework			
0-1 tasks balanced	1.19 (0.22)	1.20 (0.24)	0.75 (0.35)
2-3 tasks balanced	1.33* (0.14)	1.16 (0.18)	1.04 (0.28)
4 tasks balanced	ref.	ref.	ref.
Division of childcare			
0-1 tasks balanced		1.06 (0.25)	1.02 (0.46)
2-3 tasks balanced		0.83 (0.16)	0.86 (0.22)
4 tasks balanced		ref.	ref.
Satisfied with housework	1.26 (0.23)	0.94 (0.26)	1.00 (0.31)
Satisfied with childcare		2.37* (0.34)	0.86 (0.38)
Less egalitarian gender beliefs (vs. egalitarian)	1.43* (0.14)	0.94 (0.16)	1.43 (0.22)
Respondent is a man	1.01 (0.16)	1.05 (0.19)	1.02 (0.26)
Couple is married (vs. cohabitation)	1.43* (0.17)	1.08 (0.14)	1,84** (0.23)
Duration of union in years at interview	0.91*** (0.03)	0.98 (0.03)	0.94 (0.04)
Age difference between the couple	1.00 (0.01)	0.99 (0.02)	1.00 (0.03)
Her age at the interview			
18-25 years	ref.	ref.	ref.
26-30 years	1.09 (0.16)	1.36 (0.21)	0.47* (0.37)
31-35 years	1.15 (0.20)	0.89 (0.23)	0.23*** (0.41)
36-40 years	0.75 (0.35)	0.75 (0.32)	0.12*** (0.49)
Her highest level of education			
Compulsory education	0.74 (0.28)	0.74 (0.24)	0.70 (0.41)
Secondary education	0.80 (0.18)	0.74 (0.18)	0.86 (0.26)
Tertiary education	ref.	ref.	ref.
His highest level of education			
Compulsory education	0.81 (0.27)	0.87 (0.27)	0.71 (0.38)
Secondary education	0.78 (0.17)	0.60** (0.18)	0.72 (0.24)
Tertiary education	ref.	ref.	ref.
Her employment situation			
Full-time employment	ref.	ref.	ref.
Part-time employment	0.83 (0.20)	1.43† (0.18)	0.47** (0.29)
On maternal leave	*not applicable*	0.70 (0.22)	1.01 (0.33)
Other (homemaker, under education, etc.)	0.48*** (0.19)	0.63*(0.23)	0.89 (0.32)
He working full time (vs. other)	1.98*** (0.19)	1.10 (0.18)	0.88 (0.28)
Age of youngest child at interview (0-3)		0.97 (0.09)	1.23† (0.12)
N (% with birth)	692 (37%)	349 (64%)	499 (22%)
Generalized R^2		0,13	0,10

$^{\dagger}p < .10$. $*p < .05$. $**p < 0.01$. $***p < 0.001$.

Source: Norwegian GGS 2007, own calculations.

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