

The evolution of family policies and couples' housework division after childbirth in Germany, 1994–2019

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Abstract

Objective: We examine how the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth on couples' division of housework has evolved over time as a result of major family policy change.

Background: Supportive family policies are associated with a more egalitarian division of labor. However, it remains unclear how a country's transition from a modernized male breadwinner regime that supports maternal care to family policies that promote maternal employment and paternal caregiving change couples' gender-typical division of housework in the long run.

Method: We use representative survey data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (1994–2019, $N = 14,648$) and estimate the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth on mothers' absolute and relative time-use on housework over four policy periods with linear fixed-effects regression models.

Results: Across all periods, mothers took on larger absolute and relative levels of housework after childbirth, with a more pronounced and persistent gender-typical division in West than in East Germany. However, mothers spent somewhat less absolute and relative time on housework in recent periods with stronger levels of de-familiarizing and dual-earner/dual-carer policies than in earlier periods with policies supporting maternal caregiving.

Conclusion: We find somewhat smaller and less persistent re-traditionalization effects of childbirth in more supportive work–family policy periods. In sum, the small changes illustrate that even in contexts of enormous policy change, progress toward a less gender-typical division of housework has been slow and rather small.

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KEYWORDS

child care, housework; fathers; longitudinal research; parental leave; work–family issues

INTRODUCTION

Despite increased female employment, women still leave their jobs or reduce working hours after childbirth while performing a gender-typical division of housework, that is, large shares of unpaid work such as housework and childcare (Baxter et al., 2008; Nitsche & Grunow, 2016). Most Western countries therefore aim to promote a dual-earner/dual-carer model through defamiliarizing policy changes. These policies include paternal leave and affordable childcare services, resulting in positive maternal employment effects (Hegewisch & Gornick, 2011) and somewhat stronger fathers' involvement in unpaid work (Bünning, 2015; Schober & Zoch, 2019). Consequently, the slight convergence of women's and men's paid and unpaid work can be evaluated as a sign of reduced gender inequalities (Bianchi et al., 2012; Hook, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2018). However, as traditional norms still attribute unpaid work to women, the rather small developments achieved are therefore often referred to as a “stalled revolution” (England, 2010).

Numerous comparative cross-sectional studies show that supportive work–family policies promote a more egalitarian division of labor (Cooke & Baxter, 2010 for an overview). Accordingly, the gender-typical division of labor is strongly reflected in the institutional framework of a country, such as the welfare and legal system, public discourses, and work-care norms. Although women do more unpaid work in absolute and relative terms in all countries, gender differences appear to be smaller in countries with more employment-oriented family policies, like Northern Europe (Dribe & Stanfors, 2009; Gracia et al., 2011; Moreno-Colom, 2017; Neilson & Stanfors, 2014; Pailhé et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2018). This is supported by a few comparative studies showing that fathers are more involved in unpaid work in countries with individualized parental leave (Hook, 2006, 2010). However, comparative studies often contrast countries on the basis of regime typologies or single policies and, thus, may conflate disparate policies (Hook, 2006), making it hard to draw conclusions on mechanisms like altered maternal employment, fathers' involvement, or work-care preferences. We therefore contribute to the literature by examining whether the long-term shift from a modernized male breadwinner regime to family policies promoting maternal employment and paternal caregiving has led to a less gender-typical division of housework among couples.

So far, there is limited evidence on whether a country's shift toward a more supportive work–family policy framework may affect the long-term trend in couples' gender-typical division of unpaid work. Comparative trend analyses show reduced absolute time for housework by women in different countries and institutional contexts (Hook, 2010; Pailhé et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2018). Although men are taking on more unpaid work, their changes are typically small and less than those observed in women's paid and unpaid work (Bianchi et al., 2012; Hook, 2010; Pailhé et al., 2021; Sayer, 2005; Sullivan et al., 2018) and in some countries, men have neither decreased nor even changed their share of housework (Dribe & Stanfors, 2009; Neilson & Stanfors, 2014). Therefore, the convergence of relative shares of housework arises mainly from changes in women's paid and unpaid work (Bianchi et al., 2012; Hook, 2010; Pailhé et al., 2021). Altogether, a few descriptive studies suggest that countries with more comprehensive family policies and support for gender equality have greater convergence in unpaid work for men and women (Dribe & Stanfors, 2009; Neilson & Stanfors, 2014; Pailhé et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2018). However, these descriptive studies cannot causally examine whether and how couples increase their gender-typical division of unpaid work due to childbirth (Baxter et al., 2008)

and whether this re-traditionalization effect of childbirth on unpaid labor has declined over time as a result of more supportive work–family policies or other factors contributing to change.

Only a few evaluation studies on single countries have exploited longitudinal data to provide the most rigorous, yet somewhat contradictory, evidence on the role of supportive work–family policies for the division of unpaid work. While Kotsadam and Finseraas (2013) found a more equal division of housework for parents with children born after the introduction of a paternity leave quota in Norway, comparable reforms appear to have had limited effects on fathers' childcare time in Sweden (Ekberg et al., 2013) and Germany (Kluve & Tamm, 2013). However, Schober and Zoch (2019) found fathers' leave-taking in Germany to be linked more strongly to paternal childcare than housework, indicating a more equal division in the medium term. Conversely, longer maternal leave-taking was associated with a more traditional division—even when both partners had returned to full-time employment. Similarly, Bünning (2015) found increased housework contributions for fathers only in the case of longer paternal leave-taking. However, beyond the evidence on individualized fathers' leave, rigorous evaluation studies on the effect of the right to part-time work or the availability of workplace policies such as flexible working time models are scarce. Altogether, the mixed evidence from single evaluation studies may suggest that individual reforms might contribute relatively little to the long-term trend in the division of unpaid work (Sullivan et al., 2018). Given complex, recursive, intergenerational processes that often falter in the short term, a longer perspective seems more appropriate to assess long-term changes in the division of unpaid work.

Although research has emphasized the crucial role of policies, it remains unclear to what extent successive modernization of the family policy framework can contribute to long-term changes in the gender-typical division of unpaid work. We extend previous research by investigating whether and how the impact of childbirth on couples' division of housework has evolved over several periods with different family policy frameworks. As regular tasks such as cooking, cleaning, or laundry are considered more time-constraining and gender-segregated than sporadic tasks, such as gardening or maintenance (Craig & Powell, 2018), we focus on routine housework. Drawing on the time availability approach (Blood & Wolfe, 1960), constructivist identity approaches (Stets & Burke, 2000), and resource-bargaining perspectives (Lundberg & Pollak, 1996), we presume that a shift toward more employment-oriented family policies that promote maternal employment and paternal caregiving has reduced gender inequalities in couples' housework division.

We exploit the case of Germany, which has undergone an immense policy shift, changing the institutional framework from a modernized male breadwinner state with a strong focus on maternal caregiving to a context with de-familiarizing and dual-earner/dual-carer leave and childcare policies. Based on representative longitudinal data from the German Socio-Economic Panel study (GSOEP v36, 1994–2019, <https://doi.org/10.5684/soep.core.v36eu>), we distinguish between earlier periods with policies supporting maternal caregiving (1994–2000 and 2001–2006) and later periods with stronger levels of de-familiarizing and dual-earner/dual-carer policies (2007–2014 and 2015–2019). By estimating fixed-effects panel models for mothers' absolute and relative time use on routine housework and comparing results for East and West Germany, we exploit within-changes in couples' division of domestic work following the transition to parenthood (Baxter et al., 2008; Bianchi et al., 2012) as well as considerable variation in leave and childcare policies across time and between East and West Germany.

Studying trends in the gender-typical division of housework is extremely relevant as a large number of studies have identified a close link with women's lower labor supply (e.g., Müller & Samtleben, 2022) and lower career and income trajectories, resulting in wage and pension disadvantages (Aisenbrey et al., 2009). However, although many studies highlight the gender-typical division of unpaid work after childbirth and its persistence over the life course (Nitsche & Grunow, 2016; Voßemer & Heyne, 2019), the long-term trends and the role of employment-oriented and de-familiarizing family policies for couples' division of housework are not yet well

understood. Germany is particularly well-suited to investigate whether a shift toward more employment-oriented family policies is linked to reduced re-traditionalization effects of childbirth. Maternal employment has traditionally been low, particularly in West Germany (e.g., Aisenbrey et al., 2009; Zoch, 2021); hence, Germany has implemented major policy reforms, such as expanding childcare services and several parental leave reforms. These reforms have transformed the German welfare state from a model that strongly supports maternal caregiving to a “dual-earner/dual-carer” regime, which better supports work and family life compatibility. Despite these tremendous reforms, there is no empirical evidence on whether these changes have affected long-term trends in the gender-typical division of housework. With enduring East–West variations in childcare provision, labor market opportunities, maternal employment, and work-care norms (Blien et al., 2016; Rosenfeld et al., 2004; Zoch, 2021), Germany provides the unique opportunity to enhance our understanding of the evolution of family policies for couples’ housework division. Hence, we establish first longitudinal evidence on whether, and to what extent, the effect of childbirth differs in contexts with similar changes in the institutional setting but strong cultural East–West differences in work-care norms and, thus, extend previous comparative or single-country studies without considerable variation in family policies, the labor market, and the cultural context.

The article proceeds as follows: It first explains the theoretical framework and then contextualizes the tremendous policy changes in Germany. The following sections then present the analytical strategy and results. Finally, we summarize and discuss the findings of the study.

BACKGROUND

Explaining couples’ division of housework

Previous research draws on three prominent strands of theory to explain couples’ division of unpaid work: specialization and related time availability based on the neo-classical economic theory (Becker, 1981), bargaining approaches (Lundberg & Pollak, 1996), and cultural approaches linked to preferences and gender ideologies (Stets & Burke, 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

According to the neo-classical economic theory (Becker, 1981), couples maximize their household income through a specialized division of labor based on a comparative advantage. Therefore, the partner with the higher relative potential earnings specializes in paid work, whereas the other partner specializes in unpaid work. This is in line with the time availability approach, describing limits for housework and childcare due to longer working hours (Coverman, 1985). Although the classical economic theory is generally gender-neutral, it is mostly women who interrupt their employment or at least reduce their working hours after childbirth due to lower earnings before birth and gender norms that foster a comparative advantage in unpaid labor for women, thus leading to a gender-typical division of labor. Furthermore, longer employment interruptions are likely to lead to depreciation of relevant labor market knowledge and, therefore, lower future earnings due to less career advancements and discrimination by employers. Therefore, a gender-traditional division of labor is often followed even as children grow older (Nitsche & Grunow, 2016).

Resource-bargaining approaches aimed at broadening the neo-classical economic theory by incorporating the mechanism of power differentials between partners (Lundberg & Pollak, 1996). Given women’s increased human capital, labor force participation, and birth control, their increased returns to paid employment, and the resulting reduction of the prenatal gender wage gap, the neo-classical approach has been criticized for not adequately explaining the slow progress toward a more equal division of labor (Siminski & Yetsenga, 2022). Bargaining approaches therefore presume couples to negotiate their household specialization

based on partners' relative earnings, education, and future income potential. Therefore, the partner with the relatively lower earnings—usually the woman—is more likely to take on larger shares of unpaid work, particularly the less satisfying and enjoyable tasks such as housework. However, recent empirical findings argue that the comparative advantage plays little to no role in couples' division of labor (Siminski & Yetsenga, 2022).

Both economic perspectives have been criticized for not taking enough account of the role of gender ideologies and social norms which continue to foster a gender-typical division of roles. Sociological perspectives emphasize the relevance of socialization processes, identity formation (Stets & Burke, 2000; West & Zimmerman, 1987), and work-care norms (Auspurg et al., 2017; Hook, 2010), which continue to attribute domestic tasks more to women than men, thus, reinforcing the belief that women's primary domain is the private sphere of the home, while men's primary domain is in the public sphere of work. In this way, the deeply ingrained cultural beliefs about gendered roles, including parenting and caregiving responsibilities, are likely to influence the division of unpaid work particularly after childbirth—regardless of economic incentives and rational cost–benefit calculations (Nitsche & Grunow, 2016). Consequently, couples often adhere to a more traditional division of household labor, with women taking on larger shares of unpaid work, including less satisfying and enjoyable tasks such as housework. However, it is important to note that cultural beliefs and gender ideologies also interact with family policies (Steiber & Haas, 2012; Zoch & Schober, 2018). In more traditional contexts where supportive family policies are lacking, such as in West Germany, couples who hold more egalitarian attitudes before the birth of a child may also encounter additional barriers to deviate from non-traditional gender roles following childbirth. In this way, traditional norms and cultural beliefs, imbedded in the institutional framework, are likely to create a dynamic, thus contributing to the persistence of gendered division of labor over the life course even among couples who initially held more egalitarian beliefs. Overall, persistent norms and ideologies might therefore help to explain why women continue to take on more unpaid work after childbirth, thus weakening their bargaining power in the long run (Nitsche & Grunow, 2016). However, more recent studies find only weak empirical evidence that gender ideologies fully explain the gender-typical division of unpaid work (Auspurg et al., 2017; Voßemer & Heyne, 2019).

Altogether, we draw on specialization, bargaining, and identity approaches to formulate the general expectations that under any policy framework, we expect a re-traditionalization effect of childbirth on couples' division of housework (*Hypothesis 1*), that is, couples will divide their housework in a more gender-typical way, with mothers increasing their absolute and relative share of housework after the birth of a child.

The role of family policies for couples' division of housework

Specialization, bargaining, and identity approaches suggest that supportive work–family policies influence the gender-traditional division of labor by altering mothers' economic resources and bargaining power, as well as parents' gender norms. Empirical studies support these theoretical assumptions, by highlighting mothers' employment, fathers' leave-taking, and more egalitarian gender role attitudes as important mechanisms for a less traditional division of housework (Hook, 2006; Schober & Zoch, 2019). The re-traditionalization effect of childbirth is therefore likely to be more pronounced when policies support maternal caregiving within a (modernized) male breadwinner model. Typically, these policies include more generous but low-paid maternal leave policies and a lack of leave entitlements reserved for fathers, as well as no or only low levels of public childcare provision. Similarly, the promotion of part-time work has been found to reinforce the gender-typical specialization in household labor (Hook, 2010). Conversely, de-familiarizing and dual-earner/dual-carer policies—that is, higher levels of public childcare provision and financial incentives for paternal leave-taking—should lead to greater

involvements by fathers/mothers in unpaid/paid work, thus, contributing to a less gender-typical division of housework.

According to theories of specialization and time availability, generous but low-paid leave policies encourage longer maternal leaves and, thus, larger absolute and relative shares of unpaid work (Schober & Zoch, 2019). Conversely, non-transferable leave entitlements for fathers increase their contribution to unpaid work (Bünning, 2015; Hook, 2006; Schober & Zoch, 2019). Together with public childcare, “daddy leaves” encourage shorter maternal career breaks and more hours of work upon return, and thus, in sum, the dual-earner/double-carer family with a more egalitarian division of unpaid work (Hegewisch & Gornick, 2011).

Furthermore, the introduction of employment-oriented family policies is likely to reduce mother’s relative share of housework by strengthening their economic bargaining power. Although women’s positive income trend is closely related to higher levels of educational attainment and (prenatal) employment, it is mainly mothers who alter their labor supply due to more supportive family policies. These mothers are likely to have higher relative earnings, and thus higher bargaining power to negotiate smaller shares of family work, than mothers with childbirths in policy periods with strong support for maternal caregiving.

Finally, the introduction of supportive leave and childcare policies is not only linked to changes in couples’ decision-making based and policy-related economic incentives and changes in opportunity costs but also to altered societal norms and individual ideologies regarding the gender-typical division of paid (Steiber & Haas, 2012) and unpaid labor (Hook, 2006; Hook, 2010). Political frameworks and institutional regulations provide a reference for societal norms and individual behavior (Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). According to the concept of policy feedback effects, policy change may alter norms and ideologies, via altered role exposure and norm-setting effects, particularly when policy visibility and policy proximity are high (Zoch & Schober, 2018). This is supported by a large number of comparative studies highlighting the role of family policies not only for shaping opportunity structures but also for influencing cultural ideals regarding the gendered division of labor (Hook, 2006, 2010; Steiber & Haas, 2012). Additional evidence stems from recent longitudinal studies that highlight short-term changes toward less traditional gender ideologies due to changing role exposure and norm-setting effects of family policy reforms (Ziefle & Gangl, 2014; Zoch & Schober, 2018).

Altogether, the introduction of supportive work–family reforms such as leave and childcare policies are accompanied by important changes in economic incentives, opportunity costs, and norm-setting effects which alter mothers’ time and economic resources, their bargaining power, as well as parents’ gender role attitudes, thus, fostering a less gender-typical division of housework after childbirth.

Family policy changes in Germany and couples’ division of housework

The institutional framework of family policies and labor markets in Germany is strongly influenced by its historical division before reunification in 1989/1990. During 40 years of separation, the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR) and the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) supported maternal employment and caregiving very differently. Due to strongly de-familiarizing policies, East German mothers had shorter interruption durations and usually worked full-time upon return compared to West German mothers’ long interruptions and low (part-time) employment rates. Thus, dual employment led to more egalitarian norms in the East, which are still evident in younger cohorts today (Zoch, 2021). However, the division of unpaid work remained strongly gendered also in the East (Rosenfeld et al., 2004).

Although the reunification extended the legal framework of the West to East Germany, including parental leave and employment regulations, institutional differences remained

persistent, with greater labor market inequalities and persistently higher levels of public childcare services in the East than in the West (Blien et al., 2016). This framework has continued to support more egalitarian work-care norms and maternal labor supply (Zoch, 2021), with more mothers returning to work earlier and working full-time. Given less incentives for an economic specialization, a higher bargaining power of women, and less traditional gender role attitudes compared to West Germany, we therefore presume that under any policy framework following the reunification of Germany in 1990, the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth is less pronounced in East than West Germany (*Hypothesis 2*).

Like many European countries, Germany has undergone enormous changes in family and labor market policies to further increase maternal employment, particularly in West Germany. Considering the most important parental leave and childcare reforms in Germany, we distinguish four time periods which we also apply in our empirical analyses and draw on to describe the link between a more employment-oriented family policy framework and a less traditional division of housework among couples.

Phase 1—Supported familialism 1990–2000

Following reunification in 1990, family policies strongly encouraged the modernized male-breadwinner model until the 2000s. Although East German mothers continued to take shorter interruptions and worked more hours than West German mothers due to egalitarian gender culture, greater childcare provision, and a stronger need for double income in East Germany, they adapted their labor supply to the tremendous changes in the labor market and institutional context. The period of job-protected leave was extended several times—first to 18 months in 1990 and, finally in 1992, to a maximum of 3 years (Drasch, 2012)—and accompanied by parental allowance, related to household income and paid for up to 24 months long. With these extensions and the tremendous transformations of the labor market, including mass unemployment and occupational changes, more East German women did not work at all or worked fewer hours (Barth et al., 2020). In addition, childcare capacities were reduced due to declining birth rates in East Germany, while a legal entitlement for children up to the age of 3 years increased enrollment and maternal part-time employment in West Germany since 1996 (Schober, 2014). Hence, we expect pronounced East–West differences in the division of housework, with a less gender-typical arrangement in East Germany. Given the institutional framework of supported familialism up to the 2000s, we expect both East and West German couples to have the most pronounced re-traditionalization in the division of housework during this period than couples with childbirth in all following policy periods.

Phase 2—Increased (part-time) employment incentives 2001–2006

In the early 2000s, reforms shifted toward a framework of greater defamiliarization and thus increased maternal part-time employment and shared parental care (Barth et al., 2020). From 2001 parents could take leave at the same time, split the period of leave, choose higher flat-rate benefits for shorter leave, or combine parental leave with part-time employment of up to 30 h without financial loss (Schober, 2014). Whereas mothers shortened their interruption durations and increasingly worked part-time also in the early years after childbirth (Barth et al., 2020; Kreyenfeld & Geisler, 2006), paternal leave-taking remained low (5% of fathers by 20,004; Drasch, 2012). We therefore presume that the moderate changes in maternal employment and paternal caregiving in this phase are linked to only a small reduction in the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth in both East and West Germany.

Phase 3—Consolidation of optional familialism 2007–2014

In 2007, a major reform introduced income-based parental leave (Elterngeld), shortened to 12 months, with two additional individuals “use-it-or-lose-it” months for each parent (Schober, 2014). Although each parent was still entitled to 3 years of job-protected leave, the more generous and income-based compensation provided strong financial and normative incentives for shorter maternal employment breaks and greater participation of fathers in unpaid work. Additionally, an increase in childcare provision for children under 3 years old, together with the introduction of a legal claim for a slot for children aged 1 or 2 years in 2013, resulted in a sharp increase in childcare enrollment, particularly in West Germany, where the level of formal childcare supply was much lower than in the East (Schober, 2014). These historical reforms have significantly increased the number of dual-earner families (Barth et al., 2020), with more fathers taking parental leave (Bünning, 2015; Schober & Zoch, 2019). Although—mainly in West Germany—mothers returned to employment earlier (e.g., Zoch & Hondralis, 2017) and more East German mothers worked full-time (Barth et al., 2020), these reforms did not reverse the part-time trend in maternal employment. In sum, we presume this tremendous change toward a framework of optional familialism is linked to a pronounced reduction in the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth, particularly in West Germany.

Phase 4—Increased flexibility 2015–today

In summer 2015, the existing leave regulations were expanded to further support the reconciliation of work and family by financially securing maternal part-time employment shortly after childbirth (Deutscher Bundestag, 2018). Parents with faster labor market returns and dual part-time work between 15 and 30 weekly hours now receive longer benefits. Additionally, parents receive longer compensation (Partnermonate) when sharing paid employment and parental leave simultaneously for at least 4 months in a row. A third of families opt for the new ElterngeldPlus scheme and justify this with more family time or mother’s longer interruption durations and fewer working hours upon return (Deutscher Bundestag, 2018). As a result, the share of fathers taking parental leave longer than the two obligatory daddy-months has increased. According to previous empirical findings, this increased leave-take up could be linked to a decreased re-traditionalization effect of childbirth. However, official figures also suggest that the share of mothers taking leave longer than 12 months has also increased again (Deutscher Bundestag, 2018). As longer maternal leave-taking and part-time work are positively associated with a more traditional division of housework (Schober & Zoch, 2019), it remains unclear how the increased political support of combining leave and part-time work of both partners has influenced couples’ division of housework.

Taken together, the numerous parental leave reforms, which ultimately introduced high-income replacement rates and paternity quotas, as well as the childcare reform, which expanded the availability for children aged under 3 and introduced legal entitlement, are regarded as a paradigm change that has shifted the German welfare model from a modernized male breadwinner state toward a “dual-earner/dual-carer” regime. Especially the most recent reforms provide financial incentives and normative anchors for increased paternal involvement and maternal employment, including shorter interruptions and increased working hours upon mothers’ labor market return. We therefore presume the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth to be larger in the two earlier periods with policies supporting exclusive maternal caregiving than in the two more recent periods with policies supporting a dual-earner/dual-carer model (*Hypothesis 3*). Given the tremendous cultural and institutional differences between East and West Germany, with particularly pronounced disparities shortly after reunification in 1990, we expect a convergence in the re-traditionalization effect between East and West. However, as

leave and childcare reforms imply a more fundamental change in institutions and work-care norms for West German mothers, we expect that the convergence in the re-traditionalization effect is driven by stronger changes toward a less gender-typical division of housework in West Germany.

DATA AND ESTIMATION STRATEGY

We examined the change in the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth by estimating fixed-effects regression models based on couple data from the GSOEP study (v36) for the years 1994–2019. The SOEP is a representative household panel study with about 20,000 respondents from 11,000 households (Goebel et al., 2019). It provides an excellent database, as it includes annual information on the hours each household member spent on paid work, housework, and childcare on an average weekday. As it is the only panel data set with an oversample of East Germans since reunification, it is particularly suited to compare the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth between East and West Germany.

We restricted our sample to married or cohabiting women with at least two observations and distinguished a treatment group with an observed first or second childbirth and a control group of always childless individuals to account for possible selection effects on childbirth and division of housework, as well as general period effects. We draw on all private households from all random SOEP subsamples and their refreshment, thus, excluding oversamples such as the high-income or migrant subsamples (baseline sample: 139,895 observations based on 16,425 women). As we are particularly interested in the short-term effect of childbirth, thus comparing the division of housework shortly before and after, we excluded observations by women without pre- or post-birth information (9575), with a child older than 10 years ($N = 9680$), or observations of mothers without another childbirth ($N = 76,450$). To ensure that the effects are not driven by somewhat unique family settings, for example, in the case of very early or late births, we further restricted the sample to females aged 20–45 ($N = 15,096$), excluding women with a third or higher-order birth ($N = 9009$), in same-sex couples ($N = 653$), and those of couples with at least one partner in education ($N = 6,352$), in retirement ($N = 10$), with serious health issues ($N = 79$), or long-term care ($N = 245$). Based on observations with complete information ($N = 205$) and at least two valid person-years ($N = 580$), the final sample consisted of 14,648 observations, including 1648 women with 905 births in West Germany and 590 women with 402 births in East Germany. For some of the analyses, we censored parents after the fourth year following childbirth, reducing the sample to 11,543 observations with 8765 (895 births) and 2778 observations (384 births) in West and East, respectively.

The dependent variables were mothers' absolute time spent on routine housework (washing, cooking, and cleaning) on an average weekday and mothers' share relative to their partners in percent (for information on the coding, see Supporting Information: Tables A1 and A2). We use both measurements to disentangle potential shifts in the division of labor within the couple from changes in the total amount of housework over time. In the Supporting Information, we provide analyses for fathers' absolute housework hours to further contextualize our findings and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the gender dynamics in the division of housework. The key independent variable indicated childbirth based on mothers' biography information. With only few observed first births, we were forced to combine first and second childbirth; however, robustness checks revealed only small differences between first and second births.

We examined the effect of childbirth on couples' division of housework by estimating linear regressions with fixed effects (FE), which control for unobserved time-constant characteristics by estimating intra-individual changes before and after childbirth (Ludwig & Brüderl, 2021). Clustered standard errors at the individual level accounted for the nested structure of individuals in households. Given persistent East–West differences in trends in childcare provision,

maternal employment, work-care norms (Zoch, 2021), and labor markets (Blien et al., 2016), as well as to account for context-specific influences of controls, we estimate all models separately for East and West Germany using the current place of residence. Furthermore, robustness tests using an interaction were conducted to confirm these results. We implemented a two-step strategy: First, we examined whether results from FE-models with a step impact function—based on a dummy for a newborn indicating the average childbirth effect over time—and results from models with a dummy impact function provide comparable findings. By using a set of dummy variables for every year since childbirth, the dummy impact function provides a fully flexible specification to compare housework time in a given year after childbirth with the average time in all years before birth (Ludwig & Brüderl, 2021). In this way, we examined whether the re-traditionalization effect persists or diminishes over time. In a second step, we investigated the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth across time by including an interaction effect between childbirth and four policy periods: two earlier periods that predominantly fostered a (modernized) male breadwinner model (1994–2000 and 2001–2006) and two later periods with policies encouraging a dual-earner/dual-carer regime (2007–2014 and 2015–2019). To ensure unbiased estimates that were unaffected by attrition or shorter policy periods and given the fact that parents adjust their division of labor when the child grows older, we censored observations of parents with children older than 4 years for these analyses.

Our baseline models adjusted for a small number of time-varying confounders, possibly affecting both childbirth and housework (see Supporting Information: Table A2): mother's age (dummies), home ownership, size of the home, and recent move. We further controlled for quarter of the year to account for any seasonal differences in housework. The unemployment rate accounted for changes in labor demand at the federal-state level. To better understand the changes in the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth across time, we additionally examined the role of suppressor effects and mediating variables. In stepwise regression models, we accounted for mothers' and fathers' employment status and mothers' relative hourly wages to clear the effect of spending more time at home with traditional household tasks from the effect of pure time availability and possibly reduced bargaining power due to lower income and career perspectives, particularly after long interruptions durations (Schober & Zoch, 2019). Similarly, we controlled for fathers' generally shorter leave-taking using a dummy variable on leave experience (yes vs. no). As the SOEP does not distinguish very clearly between periods of leave without employment and periods of combined leave and part-time work, combined leave could be misinterpreted as a career break. Additionally, women with long career breaks may also be more likely to classify themselves as homemakers rather than reporting to be unemployed, particularly in West Germany. We therefore aimed at harmonizing these different options over time by controlling for women's work experience in years instead of leave duration. Finally, we examined whether housework is outsourced to a cleaner. The period-specific descriptives showed an increased share of working women and work experience, especially in West Germany, as well as in part-time work and leave-taking among partners (see Supporting Information: Table A3), thus indicating the change in gender roles that has slowly taken place over time.

RESULTS

The effect of childbirth on mothers' housework time

The descriptive results confirmed a positive association between childbirth and a more gender-typical division of housework, with women showing larger parenthood differences in their absolute and relative share than men (see Figure 1 and Supporting Information: Table A2). Over time, a remarkable trend for mothers is notable: Between 1994 and 2019, mothers' absolute

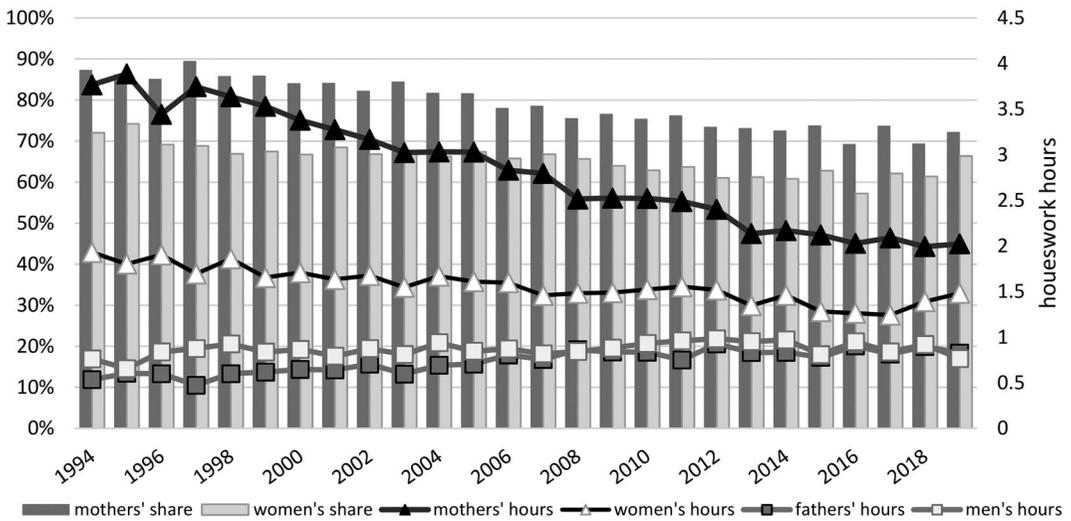


FIGURE 1 Men's and women's absolute and relative time use on housework. Mothers and fathers with first and second childbirth, whereas women and men denote childless respondents. *Source:* SOEP v36 (1994–2019), $N = 14,468$, own calculations.

time on weekdays decreased from almost 4 to 2 h. Conversely, fathers increased their housework hours only slightly to less than 1 h. Consequently, mothers' relative share decreased from 87% in 1994 to 72% in 2019. In addition, the descriptive trends for childless men and women illustrated only minor reductions in absolute hours, which are most likely due to technological progress and the altered importance of housework. Additional comparisons revealed declines in relative and absolute time use of mothers in both East and West Germany (see Supporting Information: Figure A1). However, whereas during the 2000s, these declines were particularly pronounced for East Germany, mothers' time use has hardly changed since 2014. Together with the continuous decline in housework hours in West Germany, the East–West differences in the absolute housework hours have therefore converged strongly. In the following analyses, we will test whether these descriptive trends in mothers' absolute and relative time use on housework can be confirmed using fixed-effects regression models.

Table 1 compares the results of the effect of childbirth on mothers' absolute and relative shares of housework from FE-models with a step impact function and with a dummy impact function. All models included baseline controls to account for other possible drivers of childbirth or housework allocation. Results from the step impact function (Model 1) showed that after childbirth, West German mothers increased their absolute time on housework on an average weekday by about 1.17 h, that is, 70 min, and their relative share by 10.73%. In contrast, East German mothers showed somewhat smaller changes for absolute (0.78 h/47 min) and relative (6.49%) time use. Hence, the effect sizes indicated an eight resp. 5 h increase of housework per week for West resp. East German mothers.

Comparing the results from the step impact function (M1) with the estimates from the dummy impact function (M2) highlighted a rather medium-lived re-traditionalization effect of childbirth on mothers' absolute and relative housework time. Figure 2 additionally illustrates the results from the dummy impact function by plotting the coefficients along with 95% confidence intervals. During the first 3 years, mothers spent on average between 1.35 and 0.77 h more on housework in the first 3 years than in any year before childbirth, particularly in West Germany. Although the childbirth effect was of much smaller magnitude in all subsequent years, it remained statistically significant up to the 5% level. For East German mothers,

TABLE 1 Effect of childbirth on housework: comparing different impact functions.

	Mothers' absolute housework time				Mothers' relative housework time			
	West Germany		East Germany		West Germany		East Germany	
	M1	M2	M1	M2	M1	M2	M1	M2
Childbirth	1.17*** (0.05)		0.78*** (0.08)		10.73*** (0.82)		6.49*** (1.49)	
0 years		0.77*** (0.06)		0.47*** (0.09)		7.94*** (1.01)		6.05** (1.90)
1 year		1.35*** (0.07)		0.84*** (0.11)		13.34*** (1.09)		6.75*** (1.98)
2 years		1.17*** (0.07)		0.49*** (0.12)		13.24*** (1.19)		4.33* (2.16)
3 years		1.04*** (0.08)		0.22 ⁺ (0.12)		11.02*** (1.27)		4.91* (2.27)
4 years		0.69*** (0.08)		0.05 (0.12)		10.83*** (1.40)		1.59 (2.30)
5 years		0.71*** (0.09)		0.01 (0.13)		10.36*** (1.53)		1.30 (2.53)
6 years		0.63*** (0.09)		-0.13 (0.13)		9.69*** (1.62)		-0.11 (2.68)
7 years		0.63*** (0.10)		-0.11 (0.14)		10.99*** (1.76)		1.93 (2.96)
8 years		0.49*** (0.11)		-0.10 (0.15)		9.59*** (1.89)		-1.28 (3.14)
9 years		0.35** (0.12)		-0.26 ⁺ (0.15)		8.73*** (2.01)		-3.03 (3.44)
10 years		0.21 (0.14)		-0.11 (0.15)		9.41*** (2.68)		1.57 (3.69)
Constant	1.71*** (0.23)	1.15*** (0.24)	1.59*** (0.43)	1.36** (0.43)	63.81*** (3.42)	60.19*** (3.42)	74.83*** (6.63)	72.80*** (6.63)
N	10,844	10,844	3804	3804	10,844	10,844	3804	3804
N_g	1648	1648	590	590	1648	1648	590	590
g_avg	6.58	6.58	6.45	6.45	6.58	6.58	6.45	6.45
r2_a	0.10	0.11	0.05	0.07	0.05	0.05	0.01	0.02
p	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00

Note: FE-models for mothers' housework hours and share in percent. Standard errors are in parentheses. Models adjust for mothers' age, home ownership, home size, move, quarter of the year, and unemployment rate. Source: SOEP v36 (1994–2019), own calculations.

⁺p < .10.

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

the childbirth effect was much smaller with 0.47 h in the year of birth and 0.84 h in the second year and became statistically insignificant already in the third year after birth. Finally, the results for mothers' relative time use for housework showed similar patterns like absolute time use and the East–West differences were confirmed in joint models using an interaction effect.

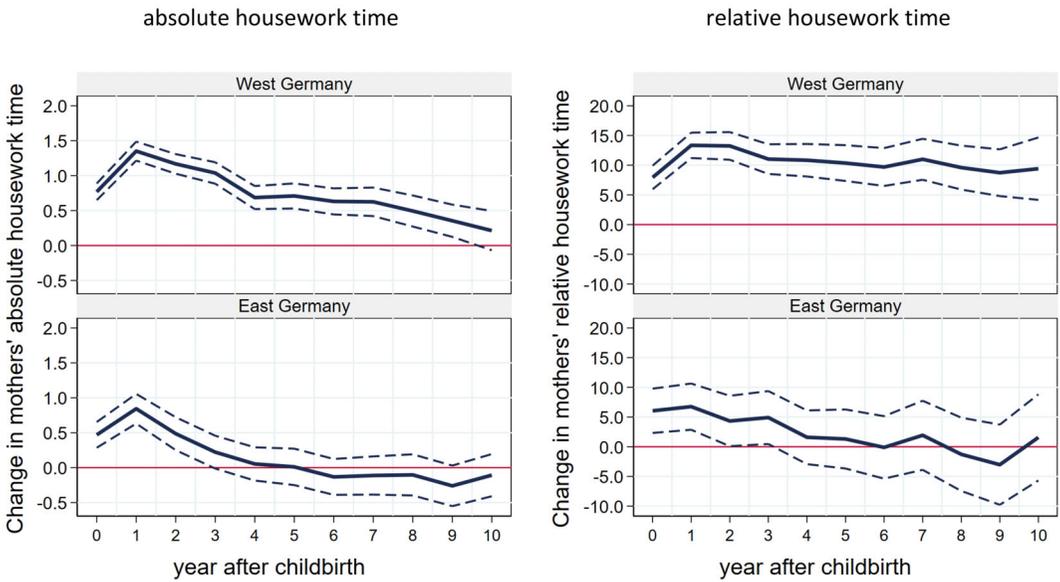


FIGURE 2 Childbirth and changes in mothers' absolute and relative housework time over child's age (coefficient plot). FE-models account for mothers' age, home ownership, size of home, recent relocation, and quarter of the year. Source: SOEP v36 (1994–2019); $N_{West} = 10,844$, $N_{East} = 3804$; 95% confidence intervals.

As the FE-estimator generally downweights treatment effects in later periods (Ludwig & Brüderl, 2021), we expected the step impact function to overestimate the childbirth effect on housework compared to the (averaged) period-specific effects. Indeed, averaging the childbirth effects of the dummy impact function provided a somewhat smaller estimate to the step impact function, with smaller differences for West Germany ($0.77 + 1.35 + 1.17 + 1.04 + 0.69 + \dots)/11 = 0.73$ vs. 1.17) than for East Germany (0.12 vs. 0.78).

To ensure that these findings were not conflated by differences in anticipation effects in East and West Germany, we modified the dummy impact function to test whether parents altered their housework time already in the year before birth periods (Ludwig & Brüderl, 2021). We found a negative anticipation effect for West German mothers' absolute time use that was, however, small and statistically significant only at the 10% level. Finally, models estimating the relationship exclusively for first births provided comparable but somewhat larger estimates for West Germany. Conversely, for East Germany, the re-traditionalization effect of first births was comparable in magnitude but more persistent than the results for the combined sample of first and second births. Altogether, these first results confirmed a gender-typical division of housework due to childbirth in both parts of Germany (Hypothesis 1), with more pronounced and persistent effects for West Germany than for East Germany (Hypothesis 2).

The re-traditionalization effect of childbirth across policy periods

For the sake of clarity, we present only the results from models utilizing a step impact function that estimates the interaction effect between childbirth and policy period in the subsequent analysis. However, given smaller effects in later years and to minimize the bias for the averaged effects over time, we censored observations of parents with children who are 4 years or older.

Figure 3 presents the effects of childbirth on mothers' absolute and relative housework time across the four policy periods from models with basic control variables. In all four periods, East

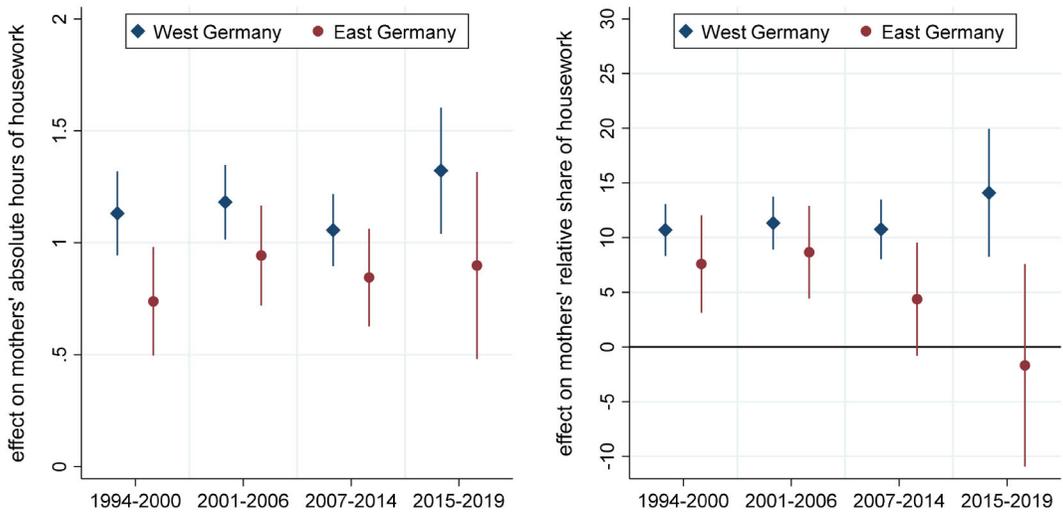


FIGURE 3 Childbirth and changes in mothers' absolute and relative time use on housework across policy periods. FE-models account for mothers' age, home ownership, size of home, recent relocation, and quarter of the year. Full models in Supporting Information: Tables A4 and A5, M2. Source: SOEP v36 (1994–2019); $N_{\text{West}} = 8765$, $N_{\text{East}} = 2778$; 95% confidence intervals.

and West German mothers spent more time on housework after childbirth. Similarly, the relative share of mothers' housework increased. From 2007 to 2014, the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth declined, however mostly for East German mothers. While from 2001 to 2006, East German women increased their relative share of housework by 8.7 percentage points after birth, this effect decreased to 4.4 percentage points from 2007 to 2014. Surprisingly, in the last period, mothers in both parts increased their absolute time-use again. However, the large confidence intervals reflect high uncertainty due to a small subsample of parents with very young children. Additional analyses confirmed moderate increases in fathers' housework hours after 2007 in both parts of Germany. However, only the more pronounced increase in fathers' absolute hours of housework in East Germany contributed to the small decreases in mothers' relative share (see Supporting Information: Figure A2). Overall, the results suggested a small positive trend toward a somewhat more egalitarian division of labor for East Germany only. Nevertheless—given the small sample with only a few observed births—none of the presented differences were statistically significant.

In the next step, we estimated stepwise FE-models to examine the role of suppressor effects and mediating variables that might drive the small changes in the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth. Our results confirm previous results (Hook, 2006), according to which mothers' current employment status and employment experience explained large parts of the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth in all periods (Supporting Information: Tables A4 and A5). In contrast, and also in line with recent studies, fathers' employment status and leave experience, as well as mothers' hourly relative wage, had little additional explanatory power (Siminski & Yetsenga, 2022). Interestingly, mothers' employment status and experience explained the re-traditionalization effects for East Germany almost entirely, whereas the childbirth effect remained substantial and statistically significant for mothers' absolute hours in West Germany, thus pointing toward further relevant factors such as a shift toward more traditional work-care norms. Re-estimating joint models using an interaction effect confirmed the statistically significant East–West differences in the re-traditionalization effect on mothers' absolute time use for the first three policy periods, 1994–2014.

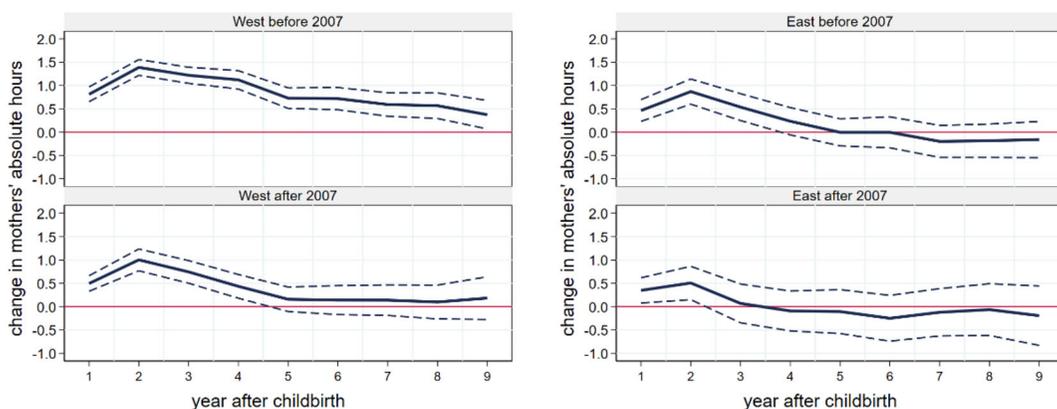


FIGURE 4 Childbirth and changes in mothers' absolute time use before and after 2007. Coefficient plots. FE-models account for mothers' age, home ownership, size of home, recent relocation, and quarter of the year. *Source:* SOEP v36 (1994–2019); $N_{\text{West}} = 10,844$, $N_{\text{East}} = 3804$; 95% confidence intervals.

Altogether, the multivariate FE-results suggested a somewhat declining re-traditionalization effect of childbirth since 2007, but these changes were rather small, statistically insignificant, and relevant mostly for East Germany. Thus, the results provided only weak support for Hypothesis 3, presuming a less gender-typical division of domestic work in periods supporting a dual-earner/dual-carer model. From a wider perspective, the results further supported a more pronounced re-traditionalization effect in West than in East Germany (Hypothesis 2).

To compare the persistency of the re-traditionalization effects for mothers with childbirth before and after 2007, we re-estimated FE-models with dummy impact functions for the larger sample of parents with children up to the age of 10 (Figure 4). Before 2007, the absolute use of household time by West German mothers did not recover to pre-birth levels. However, after 2007, mothers experienced a somewhat smaller re-traditionalization effect in the first years and a faster recovery to pre-birth levels. Nevertheless, mothers in West Germany reached their pre-natal level of housework hours only after 5 years and, thus, significantly later than mothers in East Germany before and after 2007. Before 2007, the latter showed a pronounced and significant childbirth effect during the first 3 years, but reached pre-birth levels already in the fourth year. After 2007, mothers in East Germany experienced not only a reduced re-traditionalization effect but an even faster recovery to pre-birth levels. Additional analyses confirmed that the change in mothers' relative share was mostly driven by changes in mothers' absolute hours rather than changes in fathers' housework contribution (see Supporting Information: Figures A3 and A4). Hence, the results provided further support for Hypothesis 3, presuming a smaller re-traditionalization effect for mothers with childbirth in more recent policy periods. Re-estimating joint models for East and West using an interaction effect confirmed the statistically significant East–West differences in the re-traditionalization effect, providing additional support for persistent East–West differences (Hypothesis 2).

Sensitivity checks

To examine effect heterogeneity in the childbirth effect, we re-estimated all models, distinguishing between tertiary and non-tertiary educated women; however, the results revealed small and statistically insignificant differences (see Supporting Information: Figure A5). Moreover, we compared models for respondents who were born and living in East or West Germany with those who moved from one part to another and by distinguishing mothers by birth cohort.

Finally, we tested whether further changes, such as the transition to marriage or increasingly better household equipment with electronic appliances, for example, washing machine, dishwasher, or microwave, alter the results. The findings were robust to all sensitivity checks. Finally, we re-estimated all models with a measurement combining the total hours spend on routine housework and childcare (see Supporting Information: Figures A6–A8), given that previous research has found that fathers have increased their contribution to childcare much more than their contribution to routine housework during the last decades (Bianchi et al., 2012; Dribe & Stanfors, 2009; Neilson & Stanfors, 2014; Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). Hence, focusing on routine housework could underestimate the changes in the gendered division of labor over time (Hook, 2006; Voßemer & Heyne, 2019). However, the additional analyses supported our findings of a persistent gender division of housework and only small changes in the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth over time.

DISCUSSION

Our study provides the first longitudinal evidence on small changes in the re-traditionalization effect of childbirth as a result of more supportive work–family policies. By exploiting longitudinal data from the GSOEP study (1994–2019), it is the first study that examines how the effect of childbirth on couples’ division of unpaid work has evolved over time as a result of major policy changes. We draw on several family policy reforms, introducing a paradigm change that has shifted the German welfare state from a model that strongly supports maternal caregiving in a (modernized) male breadwinner regime toward a “dual-earner/dual-carer” regime, thus better supporting work and family life compatibility. Together with long-standing and persistent East–West differences in the level of childcare provision, maternal employment, labor market opportunities, and work-care norms, this study extends previous comparative studies or single-country studies without considerable variation in family policies, the labor market, and cultural context.

Fixed-effects regression models reveal that, across all policy periods, mothers take on larger absolute and relative levels of housework, with a more pronounced and persistent gender-typical division observed in West Germany. On average, the effect sizes indicate an increase of approximately 8 h (resp. five) of housework per week for mothers in West (resp. East) Germany, which (almost) corresponds to a full working day. Our results for East Germany align with previous research (e.g., Schober & Zoch, 2019), indicating that altered employment and work experience almost entirely explain the re-traditionalization effect. However, similar to most recent findings (Siminski & Yetsenga, 2022), reduced relative wages and changes in fathers’ employment or leave-taking do not offer additional explanatory power. Surprisingly, for West Germany, the effect of childbirth remains statistically significant, even after controlling for a wide range of time-varying factors, indicating that further unobserved factors may drive the re-traditionalization effect.

Nonetheless, our findings suggest that with more supportive work–family policies implemented, mothers spend less absolute and relative time on housework in recent periods with stronger levels of de-familiarizing and dual-earner/dual-carer policies (2007–2015 and 2015–2019) than in earlier periods with policies supporting maternal caregiving (1994–2001 and 2001–2006). The decline in the re-traditionalization effect, however, is relatively small, statistically insignificant, and mostly relevant for East German mothers, which contradicts our assumptions of a somewhat stronger shift toward a less gender-typical division of housework due to a more fundamental change in institutions and work-care norms in West Germany. However, the findings on mothers’ absolute and relative time use align with the slight increase in fathers’ housework hours, which occurred only after 2007 and only for East German fathers, whereas for West German fathers, the number of housework hours remained relatively stable

over time. Finally, from a life-course perspective, we observe that East German mothers exhibit a substantially smaller re-traditionalization effect during the first years after childbirth, with a faster recovery to pre-birth housework levels after 2007. Again, changes in the level and decline over time were smaller for West German than East German mothers, but still noteworthy.

The somewhat smaller and less persistent re-traditionalization effects of childbirth in more supportive work–family policy periods are in line with previous cross-national comparative studies which found a less gender-typical division of domestic work in countries with policies supporting maternal employment and gender equality (Dribe & Stanfors, 2009; Gracia et al., 2011; Moreno-Colom, 2017; Neilson & Stanfors, 2014; Pailhé et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2018). The reduced re-traditionalization of childbirth over time thus also confirms the few descriptive longitudinal trends (Hook, 2010; Pailhé et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2018). Moreover, the persistent East–West differences even 30 years after reunification is noteworthy, given marked convergence in institutions, maternal employment, and work-care norms (Blien et al., 2016; Zoch, 2021). However, despite increased female labor force participation in the West, mothers experience significantly longer employment interruption, lower working hours upon return, and more conservative work-care norms, which are likely to limit their bargaining ability, resulting in relatively minor progress in their absolute and relative share of housework over time. In contrast, higher levels of childcare, longer opening hours, and higher levels of female labor force participation in the East may have contributed to a somewhat stronger decline in the re-traditionalization effect. Moreover, we found that East German men are more likely to adopt more hours of housework, resulting in a greater burden on both partners due to higher hours worked by women. Together with less traditional work-care norms but also lower earnings and less favorable partner markets among men in the East, this may reduce their negotiation power in the household, resulting in larger contributions and, thus, a smaller relative share of mothers' housework.

Our study is among the first to estimate a within-change of couples' division of housework over several policy periods based on panel data, thus contributing to our general understanding of the long-term impact of family policies on the gender-typical division of domestic labor. Nevertheless, the risk of biased estimates remains due to unobserved characteristics that may correlate with the observables. For example, the declined East–West migration of highly educated women or changing partner markets and, thus, altered selection into partnership and parenthood; increased egalitarian gender role attitudes or fathers' comparative advantage in housework due to increased skills and interaction with the child; or changing labor markets with a more condensed and exhaustive working day that negatively affects engagements in family life could possibly drive the observed patterns in the less gender-typical division of housework in East Germany. However, by accounting for constant heterogeneity and exploiting substantial changes within and between East and West Germany, our results provide a more robust picture than previous comparative cross-sectional studies and purely descriptive trend analyses. Unfortunately, the rather small number of births observed in each policy period, particularly in East Germany, did not allow further subsample analyses according to the number of birth or couples' characteristics. Future research should therefore carefully explore the underlying mechanisms as well as effect heterogeneity, focusing, for example, on educational attainment or workplace characteristics.

Despite the limitations described above, our research design has the great advantage of providing first longitudinal evidence on the small and slow progress toward a less gender-typical division of housework and examining underlying mechanisms much more thoroughly than previous comparative studies. Utilizing a period of significant policy change in Germany, our study highlights the importance of supportive work–family policies in reducing gender inequalities in unpaid work. However, our findings demonstrate only small changes and that there are still persistent gender as well as East–West differences in the division of housework across all policy periods. This indicates that, despite the implementation of supportive work–family

policies, progress toward a more equal division of domestic work is impeded by other critical factors, including norms, unfavorable labor market structures, and disparities in household labor market returns (Hook, 2006; Hook, 2010). In a broader context, our findings support the argument of a lagged generational change (Sullivan et al., 2018), which is subject to a complex interplay of social, cultural, and economic factors that shape work–family dynamics and result in very slow changes in a wide variety of factors. These factors need to be examined from a longer and preferably comparative perspective that considers the regional contexts and its underlying factors, including family policies.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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