

“What a Cliché, Right?” Insights from Mothers Opting for Part-Time Employment in Germany

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Abstract. This narrative study explores the intersection of motherhood, employment choices, and care responsibilities in Germany. Despite its well-documented adverse effects on career progression, pension contribution, and risk of later-life poverty, two thirds of working mothers opt for part-time employment. However, qualitative research has yielded limited insights as to why mothers choose a particular employment model considering the heterogeneity of families in Germany. This contribution draws from a sample of 17 narrative interviews, comprising eight mothers born in Germany and nine born abroad. The narrative analytical approach according to Schütze was used to carry out the analysis. The study reveals that mothers' employment decisions are shaped by a combination of personal preferences, structural constraints, and socio-economic factors. Mothers with higher education and previous full-time experience tend to pursue part-time work as a temporary compromise, often planning a return to full-time employment when family circumstances allow. However, those with limited qualifications or precarious legal and economic conditions face restricted labor market access, making part-time work less of a matter of choice and more a necessity driven by external pressures. Whether part-time work remains a career killer, a temporary option, or a personal choice, it transcends gender roles and delves into the individual biographies of mothers.

Keywords: labor market, mothers, EU migration policy, qualitative research methodology.

„Kokia klišė, tiesa?“ Motinų, pasirinkusių darbą ne visą darbo dieną Vokietijoje, įžvalgos

Santrauka. Šis naratyvinis tyrimas nagrinėja motinystės, užimtumo pasirinkimų ir globos sąveiką Vokietijoje. Nepaisant gerai dokumentuotų neigiamų pasekmių karjeros raidai, pensijų įmokoms ir vėlesnio gyvenimo skurdo rizikai, du trečdaliai dirbančių motinų renkasi ne visą darbo dieną. Tačiau kokybiniai tyrimai iki šiol suteikė tik ribotą įžvalgų apie tai, kodėl motinos pasirenka tam tikrą užimtumo modelį, atsižvelgiant į šeimų heterogeniškumą Vokietijoje. Šis straipsnis yra dalis doktorantūros tyrimo, kuriame nagrinėjami motinų švietimo siekiai. Jis remiasi 17 naratyvinių interviu imtimi, į kurią įtrauktos aštuonios Vokietijoje gimusios motinos ir devynios motinos, gimusios užsienyje. Analizei atlikti taikytas naratyvinis analitinis požiūris pagal Schütze.

Tyrimas atskleidžia, kad motinų užimtumo sprendimus lemia asmeninių siekių, struktūrinių apribojimų ir socioekonominių veiksnių derinys. Aukštąjį išsilavinimą turinčios ir anksčiau visą darbo dieną dirbusios motinos dažniausiai traktuoja darbą ne visą darbo dieną kaip laikiną kompromisą, dažnai planuodamos grįžti prie viso etato, kai šeiminių aplinkybės tai leis. Tačiau motinos, turinčios ribotą kvalifikaciją arba susiduriančios su nestabiliomis teisinėmis ir ekonominėmis sąlygomis, susiduria su ribotomis galimybėmis darbo rinkoje, todėl darbas ne visą darbo dieną joms dažniau tampa neišvengiamu pasirinkimu, nulemtu išorinių spaudimų, o ne

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asmeninių pageidavimų. Klausimas, ar darbas ne visą darbo dieną išlieka karjeros „stabdžiu“, laikinu sprendimu ar sąmoningu pasirinkimu, peržengia vien lyčių vaidmenų ribas ir gilinasi į individualias motinų biografijas.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: darbo rinka, motinos, ES migracijos politika, kokybinių tyrimų metodologija

1. Introduction

In Germany, the prevailing employment model for approximately two-thirds of mixed-gender married couples with underage children is a dual earner arrangement. Amongst those, approximately 70 percent of mothers with children under 12 opt for part-time employment, ranking second among the EU-27 member states (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2022). This widespread reduction in hours occurs despite well-documented long-term disadvantages, including slower career progression, lower pension contributions, and a heightened risk of poverty in later life (Bolle, 1997; Connolly & Gregory, 2005; Franke, 2003; Gallego Granados et al., 2019; Whittock et al., 2002; Wöflf, 2023). Participation rates are particularly low when children are very young, with only one in eight mothers of children under age three engaged in paid employment (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023). These trends extend to migration, as mothers with a migrant background¹ tend to show significantly lower labor market participation. Only about a half are employed, with factors at play such as the migration status, recognition procedures for foreign qualifications, and language skills (Gambaro et al., 2024; Henkel et al., 2016). Recent research further shows how gendered expectations of caregiving, in combination with migration-specific constraints, restrict the employment options even of highly skilled migrant mothers (Kačkutė, 2025).

To explain these persistent gendered employment differences, various theoretical frameworks have been proposed. Economic models (e.g., Becker, 1970) argue that families are utility-maximizing units that allocate tasks based on individual productivity differences. Given that women tend to earn less than men (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024b), a reduction in mothers' working hours is framed as an efficiency-driven household decision. However, this framework largely ignores structural inequalities and gendered social norms. Therefore, feminist approaches emphasize power relations, societal expectations, and the unequal distribution of unpaid care work as key mechanisms shaping women's labor market behavior (Künzler, 1994). Moreover, it has been argued that Germany's spousal income splitting system reinforces the traditional gender roles by financially privileging the higher earner, typically the man, and increasing the marginal tax burden on the secondary earner (Geyer & Wrohlich, 2013). For married women and mothers, this may render reduced labor market participation a seemingly rational choice while, in fact, reflecting broader structural constraints (for a critical discussion, see Roth (2022)).

¹ In line with German statistical conventions, the term 'migrant background' refers to individuals who either migrated to Germany themselves (first generation) or are descendants (second generation) of parents who both immigrated to Germany since 1950; see Statistisches Bundesamt (2025b).

These contrasting perspectives raise the central question of whether maternal employment choices should be understood as genuine preferences or as responses to structural conditions. To address this question, the study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in two main ways. First, in response to the predominance of quantitative research on maternal labor market participation, this study draws on a narrative analytical approach (Schütze, 1983), applying selective sequence analysis (Oevermann, 2001) to key passages that shed light on mothers’ employment decisions in the context of their biographical trajectories. In its second attempt to expand on previous findings, it takes into account heterogeneous family structures shaped by various forms of immigration (e.g., European Free Movement of Workers Act), which is an aspect of particular relevance to the German context.

The article is structured as follows. Initially, an overview contextualizes employment models in Europe and Germany. Next, three theories on varied decision making are outlined, including human capital theory, feminist theory, and the taxation regulations of spouses. The subsequent section delves into the methodology and analysis of the data collected. The research results are presented and guided by the theories discussed earlier. Finally, the paper concludes with a summary.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Labor Market Participation of Mothers in Europe and Germany

Across all occupational categories defined by the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO), employed women aged 25–54 in the EU demonstrate a greater prevalence of part-time employment with almost one third choosing to work part-time. According to data provided by Eurostat (2024), Austria (69.2 percent), the Netherlands (67.9 percent), and Germany (65.4 percent) register the highest share of part-time employment in the EU. Conversely, Bulgaria (1.6 percent) and Romania (2.4 percent) report the lowest part-time employment rates for mothers. However, these low figures apply to both women and men with or without children, suggesting a general lack of flexible work arrangements. The same applies to Latvia, Portugal, Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Croatia, with a relatively low share of part-time employment across the board, regardless of the parental status. In these countries, fewer than 10 percent of employed men and women work part-time (Eurostat, 2024). These data coincide with an extensive international review of working-time preferences and outcomes carried out by Antal et al. (2024). The data revealed significant gender disparities in working hours across various contexts, with women generally preferring fewer hours than men. Marriage usually reinforced these disparities, as men typically increase their working hours while women tend to decrease theirs. Childcare responsibilities further reduce women’s working hours, and, if part-time options are unavailable, mothers exit from the labor force (ibid.).

A similar picture emerges for Germany. However, driven by the aim of gender equality, the traditional employment paradigm characterized by a strong normative expectation of the male breadwinner and the female caregiver has undergone significant changes (Gleichen & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2018). In 1997, 36 percent of mothers in couple relationships opted for non-employment, with fathers predominantly working full-time (Mikrozensus, 2023). This percentage had decreased by almost 10 points in 2022, concomitant with a twofold increase in the dual earner employment leading towards a decline of the traditional breadwinner model (Trappe et al., 2015). In 2023, 73 percent of mothers with children under six and 63 percent with children older than 6 were employed part-time (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024a). Another employment trend is the diminishing numbers of mothers involved in marginal employment, the so-called mini-jobs², coupled with a rise in both part-time (15 percent) and full-time employment (16 percent) (BMFS-FJ, 2021a). Mini-jobs can be a biographical trap, as transitioning to socially insured employment is challenging, and these jobs often prove to make false incentives that affect a majority of women (Blömer & Peichl, 2020). One-third of all mothers remain out of the labor market despite the increasing age of the oldest child, and this particularly applies to mothers with a migrant background. Among those, the numbers in part-time employment or unemployment are significantly higher (BMFSFJ, 2013; Boll & Lage-mann, 2019; Gambaro et al., 2024), with factors at play such as language-related barriers (Bedaso, 2021; Holzinger & Draxl, 2024), a lower level of educational and vocational qualifications (Diehl, 2024; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024c), less work experience compared to the native population (Connor & Koenig, 2015; Worbs & Baraulina, 2017) coupled with lengthy formal recognition procedures (Brücker et al., 2021; Weichbold & Aschauer, 2015).

2.2 Theories of Varied Decision-Making

The New Home Economics theory, closely associated with the Resource Theory (Becker, 1960, 1976, 1981), centers around the idea that family members make rational decisions to maximize their individual utilities. Becker conceptualizes the household as an enterprise that manages various resources such as time, money, and labor. Key assumptions of the theory state that (1) the household is an economic unit where family members collaboratively work towards achieving collective goals, (2) family members make decisions based on cost-benefit considerations so that to maximize their individual preferences and goals, (3) family members specialize in particular activities to enhance efficiency, and (4) family members put investments in human capital, such as education, to promote the long-term economic success of the household (Becker, 1976, 1981). Fur-

² Minijobs are a form of marginal employment in Germany characterized by low earnings and reduced social security obligations. As of 2022, they refer to jobs with monthly earnings up to 520 euros, which are exempt from most employee social security contributions and subject to flat-rate employer contributions. Minijobs are especially common in service sectors and are disproportionately held by women, including mothers, due to their perceived flexibility.

thermore, families and households produce what he refers to as ‘commodities’, including non-economic items (such as affection, love, and children) that are not purchasable (Becker, 1976, p. 207, as cited in Hill & Kopp, 2022). Hence, it accounts for unpaid labor such as care work responsibilities.

However, according to feminist theories (for an overview with focus on families, see Few-Demo & Allen, 2020), the division of household labor is not only determined by productivity, resources, and/or human capital but also by traditional role perceptions. Gender roles are considered normative and internalized attitudes that lead to the corresponding behavior and are conceived as a one-dimensional, bipolar construct, determined by the extremes of ‘traditional’ and ‘non-traditional’ (Künzler, 1994). These approaches in some respects are part of the home economics approach. However, feminist theories add that negotiations regarding their respective contributions to housework are always power-driven, and the distribution thereof is particularly characterized by the fact that decision-making is influenced by the extent of resources, such as human capital, possessed by each partner (Künzler, 1994). Given that men are significantly more frequently employed in full-time positions compared to women, thereby contributing a higher income to the family, such negotiations are at risk to result in disproportionately unfavorable outcomes to women (*ibid.*).

The power of gender roles is a key factor in the German marriage tax splitting system. While tax laws are formally gender-neutral, referring only to ‘the taxpayer’, in practice, these laws create incentives that make employment less financially rewarding for lower-earning spouses – which is a category that often includes mothers (Friebertshäuser & Sacksofsky, 2022). It applies to both married and unmarried couples; however, it involves more favorable taxation for couples with significant income disparities. Critics of this tax method argue that it assumes a ‘traditional’ marriage as an economic consumption unit, which may not align with the contemporary family structures (Bach et al., 2011; Scherf, 1999). They contend that the division of responsibilities between spouses must be negotiated and, following the logic of previous theories, this division aligns with power dynamics. The greater the resources and human capital an individual possesses compared to their partner, the more substantial is their bargaining power. Studies on the one hand indicate that this indeed leads to negotiations and conflicts of interest within married couples (Beblo & Boll, 2014). Simultaneously, research by Beznoska (2019) demonstrated that both married and unmarried couples tend to shift towards a more unified financial approach when children are present in the household (for a detailed overview of alternatives to spousal taxation and international perspectives, see Deutscher Bundestag, 2021, 428 ff.).

3. Methods

A narrative-analytical approach (Schütze, 1983, 1987) has been applied to collect and analyze the data, aiming to gain insights into the structure, content, and/or reoccurring patterns of mothers’ biographies. The objective was to explore the interplay of individual

experiences, social structures, and cultural influences. Adhering to this research logic, this study allows for the reconstruction of individuals' attitudes concerning social roles, norms, values, and social relationships. The research design of the present study has been formulated in alignment with this methodological approach.

3.1 Data Collection

The data collection was carried out in the tradition of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The interviews were conducted between May 2021 and December 2022 in seven cities across four federal states: Berlin, Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, and Saxony-Anhalt. Contact with mothers was established through various platforms. Collaborative interviews with two Lower Saxony elementary schools and three educational staff members yielded seven interviews. An additional five interviews were initiated through a call in a university email distribution list, and the remaining five interviews were arranged through recommendations.

3.2 Sample

The sample comprises of 17 cases including interviews with mothers aged 26 to 50. Eight women were born in Germany, and nine abroad including Russia and Romania. Sixteen out of 17 women are married and in their first marriage, with one Romanian mother being a single parent. The majority have two children (12 out of 17). The mothers' educational levels range from level one to eight of the European Qualifications Framework, acquired either abroad, in Germany, or in both countries through training and recognition procedures. Of the 17 mothers, 11 work part-time, including one mini-job. Two mothers opt for full-time employment, and another four are not actively engaged in the labor market.

3.3 Data Analysis

After conducting and transcribing the 17 interviews verbatim, a six-step narrative-analytical approach was chosen for the analysis. It allows for the unraveling of seemingly incongruent empirical findings by contextualizing crucial events in these mothers' life courses regarding the division of labor toward a more gender-specific arrangement. Schütze assumes that phases of life stories fall under general principles of experience (Schütze, 1984, p. 92). The lifeline narrative can thus be systematically segmented into life phases (Step 1), each assigned a specific function (Step 2). The third step results in a structured overview of the life course, allowing for the examination of recurring patterns and specific themes in the biography. Subsequently, the verbal representations of the interviewees are juxtaposed with their biographical actions (Step 4) enabling insights into tensions between expressed intentions and actual behavior over time. This step was especially relevant for understanding ambivalent or contradictory attitudes toward em-

ployment. The final steps aimed at constructing a model of typical trajectories. To this end, the analysis concentrated specifically on biographical segments in which the mothers reflected on their employment history, working conditions, and experiences of (re-) entering the labor market.

4. Results

The analysis of the interviews revealed a dichotomy between the mothers’ perceived agency in decision-making and their mobility to adapt working hours over time. It distinguishes between choice-driven and constraint-driven part-time work arrangements, while acknowledging that decisions are often shaped by an interplay of personal values, care responsibilities, and institutional barriers, e.g., those related to migration. However, these trajectories are not static, but they interact with orientations of upward or downward mobility in working hours, reflecting both biographical shifts and institutional conditions as revealed in Step 2 of the narrative analysis. The results will be exemplified in the following through selected interview excerpts.

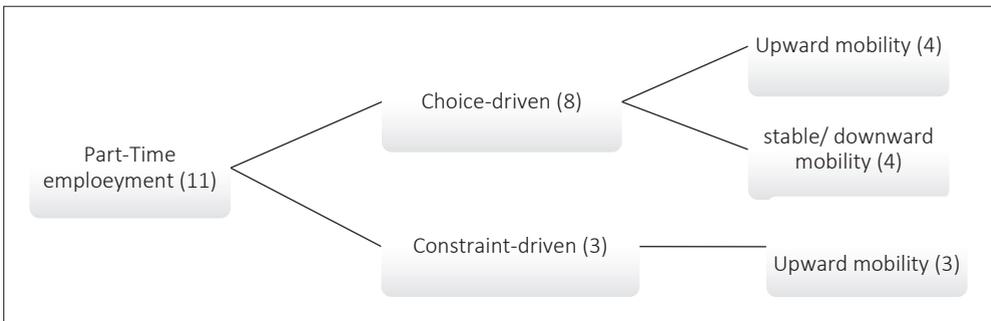


Figure 1. **Part-time typology**

4.1. Choice-Driven Part-Time Employment

4.1.1 “I’d like to increase my working hours”

What unites these mothers is a biographical path of self-determination and academic fulfillment, in which motherhood is considered just a period in life course. The women share a strong connection to their workplace, viewing it not just as a job but also as a significant part of their lives. They show potential to career advancement and a general satisfaction with their *métier*. Their husbands hold a permanent full-time position, ensuring that the family does not have to fear financial precarity. Most importantly, however, these mothers used to be full-time employed in the past, too. For example, Annett originates from the former Soviet Union; she arrived in Germany as an *au-pair* in 2000, where she met her husband and started a family with him. The couple has a 16-year-old son and a 10-year-old daughter. Annett studied German as a foreign language and teaches German

as a foreign language and integration courses for migrants and refugees at an adult education center. Prior to having children, Annett worked full-time. While she finds the current situation satisfactory, she can envision fully re-entering the workforce in the future.

Maybe I will work more later, that's what I've been thinking. I have a part-time job, because, of course, I want to be at home when my children return from school and, uh, cook. That's part of it. [...] I don't necessarily have to control them or have them with me all the time, but I just want to be there. (...) But, as I said, maybe I will have a full-time position again. It depends on how the situation unfolds. Occasionally, I work on Saturdays; I conduct exams. It's like a side job, and I enjoy working on Saturdays sometimes. Annett, 45

Similarly, Gabija, a German mother with two daughters in the 4th and 6th grades, exhibits a trend towards increasing her working hours. Although she is currently employed part-time and even willing to give up her position entirely to focus on her children's education, she envisions different long-term plans for herself. Regarding her professional future, Gabija clearly articulates the ambition to expand her employment scope. This aspiration stems not only from her satisfaction with her current occupation, just as in Annett's case, but also from a long-term need for financial security.

I'd like to increase my working hours a bit. Right now, I work 19.5 hours per week. Expanding that somewhat would be beneficial, especially to make a noticeable difference in my future pension. Gabija, 43

By seeking to increase her professional engagement, she aims not only for personal fulfillment through meaningful work but also for financial independence that could protect her from potential economic insecurities later in life. Therefore, Gabija's perspective illustrates how individual aspirations are shaped by broader structural dynamics, with her choices reflecting a strategic negotiation of the risks associated with part-time employment.

4.1.2 "What a cliché, right?"

The second group displays a general trend of decreasing or at least not increasing working hours. This type includes mothers from various social and educational backgrounds, including Russian, German, and Romanian mothers with education levels varying from 3 to 7 according to the European Framework. Austėja, for instance, a German childcare worker with children aged five and ten, sees work and education primarily as a necessary stage in a conventional life course, without feeling a strong intrinsic drive for professional advancement. Her marriage seems to be characterized by a predominantly traditional gender role distribution concerning household and children. For her, completing high school and vocational training are obligations that must be fulfilled within the framework of a socially normative life trajectory.

That's why, I believe, it didn't bother me so much that I was pregnant right after my training. Because I knew, okay, now I can live my life the way I want. I'm basically done with all obligations. Austėja, 31

Interestingly, Austėja feels relieved to have completed the training phase, considering it as a kind of liberation from *all obligations*. Among these obligations, she might include societal expectations associated with conventional educational milestones. In contrast, immediate pregnancy represents, for her, an opportunity for self-determination. And while she has been involved in a part-time position, she currently decreased her working hours by holding a so-called mini-job.

Always working around 450 Euros here and there, but otherwise, a full-time mom. A housewife. What a cliché, right? Honestly, it's like a complete cliché here for us (laughs). Yeah, really. Getting married, finishing training, starting a family, having children, and then (laughs) the man brings home the money, and yeah, that's it (laughs). Austėja, 31

She emphasizes not being motivated to enter what she calls a *real professional life*. While she might miss working with a *cool colleague* and having fun, upon careful consideration, she prefers the current situation. Her husband has a permanent full-time position with the option of working from home, so she prefers spending time with her children. However, some remarks do suggest that Austėja has had few positive educational and work experiences in her life so far. In contrast to Luisa and Annett, who find fulfillment and a sense of belonging in their professions, this is not the case for Austėja. It is conceivable that she might approach her work participation differently with more positive work experience. This would also explain why she refers to herself as a cliché, which carries a somewhat negative connotation.

4.2 Constraint-Driven Part-Time Options

4.2.1 “... it's utopian for me”

The two mothers in this group are primarily characterized by a family situation that limits their scope of employment. In Jette's case, this is due to her husband's limited involvement in household responsibilities. While he generates the lion's share of the household income, all domestic responsibilities and the care of their two sons aged eight and five are delegated entirely to her. Therefore, Jette currently balances family management with an unfulfilled career aspiration. Furthermore, she is employed in her husband's firm as an insurance clerk, and this intensifies her sense of lack of independence and professional fulfillment.

The entire responsibility for our two children essentially rests with me. (...) I would really like to study to become a teacher, but it's utopian for me. (...) If I were to develop myself professionally in a different direction, then nothing would be guaranteed here in the mornings, right? No getting up, I mean everything would have to work, both with my job and my children. I would have to pick them up. I don't know how all of this is supposed to work, right? Jette, 36

Jette appreciates the flexibility of her job and acknowledges her husband's major role in securing the family's financial stability. However, her inner conflict stems from her desire for greater professional fulfillment. She feels torn between the wish for change and the fear that a career shift might disrupt the family's balance.

4.2.2 “I just want to spend time with my baby”

Nela, a Romani mother without a professional qualification, holds a right to work under the EU Freedom of Movement Act, while her husband, originating from India, must undergo a lengthy approval process after they arrived in Germany. The search for work dominates Nela’s life course, creating an ever-present state of precariousness. It serves as a source of financial security and sustenance for all family members, which must be guaranteed, since the threat of unemployment entails the risk of deportation. In contrast to the other mothers, she faces additional challenges in the labor market due to language barriers and a low level of educational attainment. In contrast to previously discussed mothers who expressed a desire to resume work on a larger scale, Nela therefore demonstrates a contrary perspective.

I work in a cheese factory. I have to get up at three in the morning and then drive with my colleagues to work, because I don’t have a car. (...) My husband does not have a work permit yet, but I do, so I have to work. It’s positive that I have a job, but it is also very hard to manage. My child is with his father, and I am gone for 8 or 9 hours. That is too long. I just want to spend time with my baby and not have to leave by three in the morning. Nela, 31

The distinguishing factor that sets Nela apart from the other mothers is the fact that she does not have a real choice between part-time and full-time employment. She is bound by institutional requirements, forcing personal preferences and professional fulfillment into the background.

5. Discussion

5.1 Choices and Constraints:

Individual Investment versus Unequal Opportunities

Annett and Gabija demonstrate prior investment in their education and professional skills, which aligns with Becker’s assertion that human capital accumulation increases employability and long-term economic returns (Becker, 1964). The concern for future pension security, particularly expressed by Gabija, indicates a forward-looking strategy to enhance her economic stability, which is consistent with the rational decision-making assumed in human capital theory. What unites the two mothers is a full-time position before the birth of their children, and that is why they are not averse to returning to full-time employment in the future. That aligns with previous findings in the sense that women with a history of full-time employment, occasionally supplemented with periods of part-time work or non-employment, tend to return to full-time more often than those whose labor market history combines spells in part-time work with non-employment (Connolly & Gregory, 2005). Furthermore, whether mothers work full-time, part-time, or even opt for no employment does not necessarily correspond to their academic level (Dechant & Blossfeld, 2015). On the other hand, mothers who have less favorable educational backgrounds and supportive networks navigate the labor market significantly

less effectively, thereby creating a cycle of marginalization that is absent in Becker’s theory. His framework assumes equal market access for individuals based on skills, but it overlooks how systemic inequalities disrupt this theoretical assumption. This is exemplified by mothers who migrated under the EU Freedom of Movement for Workers in the current study. Nela, who holds a secondary school certificate without professional qualifications, faces severely limited opportunities in the labor market, leaving her with virtually no choice but to accept low-skilled employment in a cheese factory. In line with Nela’s experience, 38 percent of newly arrived Romanian migrants have no formal vocational training and, among those, labor migration predominates, accounting for 70 percent (Gostomski, 2016). This applies to other unqualified populations in Germany as well, in which it paves their way into the so-called ‘helper positions’. In the German labor market, helper positions refer to low-skilled, entry-level jobs that require minimal formal qualifications and are often associated with physically demanding or routine tasks. These positions serve as entry points into the German labor market and help bridge qualification procedures. However, for nearly one-third of third-country nationals, these positions become their primary form of employment, limiting upward mobility, long-term career prospects, and educational attainment (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2024). Therefore, it can be assumed that Nela’s situation is not an isolated case, but rather reflective of a broader trend, as many labor migrants are employed in the low-wage sector.

5.2 Internalized Gender Norms and Care Responsibilities

Gender norms intersect with human capital dynamics, influencing mothers’ willingness to sacrifice personal ambitions for family responsibilities, reinforcing societal expectations to prioritize their children’s needs over their own. Consequently, those mothers who fully embrace re-traditionalization experience a reduction in labor market participation, risking skill erosion. Therefore, the notion of gender norms as ‘internalized’ constructs is evident when mothers like Austėja accept traditional roles while simultaneously acknowledging their limiting nature (“What a cliché, right?”). On the other hand, Jette’s feelings of being trapped and overwhelmed despite her desire for professional development illustrate how caregiving norms, rather than purely economic rationality, dictate her employment choices. Over 70 percent of mothers in couple households with children under 16 years old state that they provide all (6 percent) or most (67 percent) of what is commonly known as care work (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2020). Interestingly, according to representative time-use data from 2012 and 2013, significant discrepancies are observed even apart from the employment model and educational attainment of the spouses, with mothers bearing the majority of domestic work (Klünder, 2016). One might expect that the uneven distribution would lead to an increased dissatisfaction among mothers. However, this does not seem to be the case. Representative data reveal that only one in four mothers expresses a desire for an increased participation from their partners, and, moreover, this figure has decreased by ten percentage points over the last 13 years, from 37 to 27 percent (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2020). The number

of mothers explicitly emphasizing that an increased involvement is ‘not necessary’ has even increased by four percent, while it has decreased by the same percentage among fathers in the same period (ibid.). In other words, most mothers see no reason to demand greater engagement from fathers. On the contrary, for a better family-and-work balance, mothers state that they want more flexible working hours (40 percent), followed by a paid household helper (36 percent), more opportunities to work from home (30 percent), and reduced transportation for school, daycare, hobbies, etc. (31 percent). Expansion of full-day childcare ranks 11th out of 13 options, with only 8 percent (Institut für Demoskopie Allensbach, 2020). It is of importance to note, however, that less than a quarter of all mothers hold a position that is compatible with home office work, and studies indicate that it leads to an overall increase in working hours both for mothers and fathers (Pauliks et al., 2023).

5.3 Deficits in Childcare Infrastructure

On the other hand, the gendered division of labor may be less attributable to the partners’ involvement in caregiving tasks and more to the insufficient availability and quality of childcare in Germany, which is a topic that has been prominently debated in socio-political discussions for quite some time. Both scholars and politicians point towards structural features, since the expansion of childcare infrastructure has had and continues to have positive effects on the increase in the employment rate, the extent of employment, and thus on the division of labor between parents, providing better protection against economic risks (Deutscher Bundestag, 2021). In Germany, a legal entitlement to a daycare place for children from the age of one has been in place since 1990 (SGB VIII, § 24), regardless of the employment status of the parent(s), and it includes both the right to choose specific care arrangements and the possibility of financial compensation if the entitlement is not fulfilled (Beckmann & Meysen, 2021). However, the accounts of the mothers in this study indicate that only a minority actually make use of this entitlement. The majority prefer to forgo formal childcare, particularly during the first years of a child’s life. This preference is not limited to mothers who have migrated under the EU Freedom of Movement and aim to enter regulated professions but is also evident among mothers without formal qualifications as well as native German mothers, regardless of their educational or socio-economic background. In line with these preferences, the nationwide average childcare enrollment rate for children under the age of three remains relatively low at as little as 37 percent (Statista, 2024). In contrast, the enrollment rate for children between the ages of 3 and 6 is significantly higher, exceeding 91 percent (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2025a). Even though the number of educators working in early childhood institutions has increased by 51 percent over the past ten years, staffing conditions remain highly strained. According to the latest daycare report by the German Parity Welfare Association, substantial deficits exist regarding the quality of care, staff resources, and allocation of places (Der Paritätische Gesamtverband, 2022). Over 90 percent of the 1,100 childcare professionals surveyed reported maintaining waiting lists

of up to 40 children, while only 3.6 percent had any available spots at the time of the survey. Waiting lists were the longest in large urban areas with populations exceeding 500,000. Additionally, 60 percent of respondents stated that, given the current caregiver-to-child ratios and the quality of professional training, they were unable to meet the developmental needs of the children in their care. This issue is particularly pronounced in daycare centers serving socially disadvantaged neighborhoods, where the demand for targeted support (e.g., language acquisition assistance) often exceeds capacity. Recruiting new staff is also challenging due to precarious working conditions, limited opportunities for professional advancement, and minimal prospects for salary increases (Der Paritätische Gesamtverband, 2022). Parents seeking high-quality care for their children are therefore confronted with a persistently inadequate childcare infrastructure.

5.4 Tax Splitting

Germany’s spousal income-splitting system provides an institutional lens for analyzing labor division (BMFSFJ, 2014). Proponents of the system emphasize the freedom it provides in distributing household responsibilities. The gender or income of the higher-earning partner does not impact the tax burden, regardless of whether the division of responsibilities is 50-50, 100-0, or 0-100. Niemeier (2012) provides a comprehensive analysis on this. He argues that the fundamental mistake in assessing the marriage tax splitting lies in neglecting the ability-to-pay principle, derived from the equal treatment demand of the German Constitution. The ability-to-pay principle, as a measure of justice, aims to determine the tax burden according to the sacrifice capacity of each individual. The restriction of needs satisfaction follows from taxation and should be equal for every citizen with comparable income, according to the principle of equality. The ability-to-pay principle concerns both the income level and the number of people in the household. Individual taxation without considering the maintenance obligation leads to a higher tax burden for the higher earner and the couple compared to two singles with half of the couple’s income each. Niemeier emphasizes that the marriage tax splitting should not be seen as an advantage but as an effect that avoids discrimination and complies with the equal treatment demand of the constitution (Niemeier, 2012). However, the financial stability provided by the husbands’ full-time employment in several cases (e.g., Austėja, Jette) supports a discussion about how the tax system incentivizes the traditional gender roles. The ability-to-pay principle, as described here, can be applied successfully if there is actual equality of opportunity. In reality, however, systemic inequalities persist due to factors such as the social background, access to education, and discrimination. Referencing to Nela’s case illustrates this well. Her limited labor market opportunities due to low qualifications and language barriers demonstrate that formal equality in terms of legal rights does not automatically translate into the actual equality of opportunity (Siboni & Galizzi, 2023). Therefore, it is important to distinguish between formal equality of rights (equal legal frameworks) and actual equality of opportunity (fair starting conditions in a social context). If only legal equality is present, systemic barriers such as discrimination,

poverty, or lack of education can prevent certain groups from accessing the same life chances (Dahrendorf, 1979) as those available to other groups.

5.5 Occupational Preferences

Allinger (2019) raises the question of whether mothers' and women's reduced working hours might also be a reflection of personal preferences, thereby challenging the assumption that a reduced labor market participation is the result of tax-related disincentives. Spousal income splitting itself does not create incentives for specialization – as it merely fails to counteract the already existing ones, since the couple's overall tax burden remains unaffected by the way how they divide their work (Allinger, 2019). However, it is essential to consider the career choices of men and women, as women are disproportionately represented in occupations within the social sector, which are (typically) lower paid. Women constitute the largest share in healthcare occupations (82.2 percent) as well as in social and educational professions (Pfahl & Wittmann, 2022). Education and teaching, with a 74 percent female workforce, ranks fifth in the average gross monthly earnings for full-time employees, with a salary of 4,733 euros (Statista, 2023). The highest-paying industry is finance and insurance (5,841 Euro), where the gender ratio is relatively balanced at 48 percent women to 52 percent men (Statista, 2020). However, women are significantly underrepresented in management positions. At the top of the hierarchy, men dominate both the finance sector (9.8 percent men versus 2.6 percent women) and the insurance sector (11 percent men versus 2.8 percent women) (Statista, 2020). This trend even persists in professions mainly occupied by women (social and cultural service), where they represent well over 80 percent of assistants and skilled workers, and only 65 percent of specialists and experts (Pfahl & Wittmann, 2022). Notably, men are overrepresented in both highly paid and some of the lowest-paid professions. In contrast to women, they are frequently employed in physically demanding jobs, such as construction, manual labor, and industrial work. This dual representation reflects gendered labor market segmentation, where men are often found at both extremes of the wage spectrum. The lowest gross monthly earnings, amounting to 2,860 euros, were received by employees in agriculture, forestry, and fishing (Statista, 2023), and this sector is largely dominated by men (71 percent) (Pfahl & Wittmann, 2022). To sum up, the areas of interest for women and men seem to differ to a large extent, particularly in the sectors of education, teaching, and healthcare, as evidenced by occupational choice statistics. Long-term studies further indicate that these trends remain relatively stable over time, showing little change in gender-specific career preferences (Pfahl & Wittmann, 2022). Out of a total of 14 occupational fields, only three are clearly female-dominated, and this has changed very little between 2013 and 2022, which may point both to the persistence of gender stereotypes and to the argument of personal preferences.

However, these numbers refer to skilled workers. The picture changes substantially when focusing on statistics related to the helper positions in Germany. Across the majority of all male-dominated professions, the proportion of female skilled workers is consid-

erably lower than that of female helpers (Köhne-Finster et al., 2023). The discrepancies are particularly pronounced in metalworking (7.8 vs. 23 percent), mechanical engineering (4 vs. 30 percent), electrical engineering (17 vs. 39 percent), and plastics manufacturing (17 vs. 35 percent) (Köhne-Finster et al., 2023). This suggests that women with limited or no formal qualifications (including those with unrecognized foreign certificates) often have no real choice but to accept work models and occupational fields not based on personal preference, but rather those shaped by the structural constraints of their life circumstances. Given that one in three individuals in a helper position holds a foreign nationality, this applies particularly to migrant women.

6. Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that mothers’ decisions to engage in part-time employment result from an interaction of personal choices, economic conditions, and societal expectations. While structural barriers such as spousal taxation, limited childcare availability, and labor market discrimination undeniably shape these decisions, they do not fully define them. Many mothers consciously choose part-time work to balance caregiving and professional fulfillment, driven by personal values and their desire to be present in their children’s lives. However, the extent of this choice is unevenly distributed: mothers with previous full-time experience, higher qualifications, or supportive partners navigate the labor market with greater agency. In contrast, those with limited educational backgrounds, precarious legal status, or less supportive family structures often face constrained options. Thus, while gender norms play a significant role in shaping caregiving expectations, employment patterns also reflect varied life trajectories, previous work histories, and differing levels of access to resources and opportunities. Beyond the individual level, however, these findings raise broader questions about social justice and equality in Germany. If only certain life models allow for long-term economic security, while others result in precariousness, then genuine freedom of choice remains an illusion for many. A fair society must ensure that all caregiving models, including those centered on early maternal care or part-time employment, are socially and economically viable. Otherwise, structural inequalities are quietly perpetuated under the guise of individual preference.

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