

WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT
IN A
COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

TANJA VAN DER LIPPE
LISET VAN DIJK

Editors



ALDINE DE GRUYTER
New York

2001

8

Harmonizing Work and Family in the
European Union

*Public Perceptions of Children as an Obstacle to
Women's Employment*

APRIL BRAYFIELD, RACHEL K. JONES, AND MARINA A. ADLER

INTRODUCTION

The European Union has a longstanding commitment to the principle of gender equality in the labor market. In fact, since 1957, Article 119 of the Treaty of Rome¹ stipulates that women and men should receive equal pay for work of equal value. Consequently, the European Council of Ministers has issued several binding directives on women's employment, and the European Commission has set up administrative units, observatories, and research networks to monitor and promote equal opportunities for women and men. Despite these laudable efforts, women's disadvantaged position in the labor market persists, to varying degrees, across member states of the European Union. This pattern is mainly due to the fact that women continue to bear a disproportionate share of responsibility for childcare and housework. In other words, normative expectations regarding women's role in family life continue to limit women's labor force participation. Of course, the degree to which women successfully balance paid work and family life depends on infrastructural supports for women as workers and men as caregivers. Recognizing this situation, the European Commission seeks ways to "reconcile" or "harmonize" the interface of employment and family life, within the broader context of the economic unification of Europe. At the same time, this economic convergence has generated concerns about women's potential losses, given the contemporary restructuring and retrenchment of national welfare systems (Monk & García-Ramon, 1996).

In this chapter, we examine how public perceptions of women's work-family dilemmas arise out of distinct national contexts within the European Union. We are interested in untangling the empirical linkages between public opinion, state policy, and demographic circumstances. To do this, we focus on individual attitudes toward a crucial aspect of the work-family nexus, that is, perceptions of children as an obstacle to women's employment. Why do these perceptions matter in the debate over family policies and equal employment opportunities? We contend that when women and men regard having children as a liability to women's employment, women's choices and opportunities will be limited indeed, irrespective of the presence (or absence) of structural constraints. This is the case either because women themselves may avoid particular jobs or because employers may consider women's reproductive responsibilities as an extra expense or an impediment to their work commitment.

Three basic questions guide our research. First, to what degree do public perceptions of children as a barrier to women's employment vary across national borders? Second, how are these perceptions linked to national context, net of compositional differences in personal characteristics? And third, how do the effects of individual-level characteristics on perceptions vary across national context?

To investigate these issues, we use data from the 1993 Eurobarometer survey, which contained a topical module on family issues. We limit our analysis to the twelve countries that were members of the European Union at the time of the survey: Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, and the United Kingdom.²

EUROPEAN DIVERSITY IN THE WORK-FAMILY INTERFACE

Most Western European countries have experienced several important demographic trends in recent decades, albeit at different paces and magnitudes. First, Europeans are having fewer children today than they did twenty years ago. In fact, with the exception of Ireland, total fertility rates are below replacement (see Table 8.1). This downward trend in fertility has been most dramatic in countries with historically higher fertility rates, such as Spain, Italy, Portugal, and Ireland. Second, marriage rates are declining, while divorce rates are rising throughout Europe. Notably, family structures vary substantially across the member states, with a north-south divide: single-parent families and cohabiting couples with children (outside marriage) are much more common in northern than southern Europe (European Commission 1994; Eurostat 1995). This trend is a consequence of several factors, including lower levels of economic and urban development in southern

Europe as well as the relative importance of religion. The general rise in women's employment also has irrevocably altered the fabric of family life, and this is the third important demographic trend across European countries. Many women are delaying or even foregoing childbearing because of its potential negative effects on earnings, seniority, and career trajectories (see Adler, 1997). At the same time, more mothers of young children are working outside the home, and thus the demand for substitute childcare and other domestic services has increased exponentially over the past fifty years.

Although all European countries have experienced these fundamental changes, the rate of women's labor force participation varies considerably among the member states. Figure 8.1 illustrates the diversity in the employment rates of women aged twenty to thirty-nine with at least one child under the age of five in 1992 (also see Table 8.1).³ Notably, maternal employment rates are highest in Denmark, Portugal, Belgium, and France. Denmark stands out as the leader in maternal employment with 85 percent of all mothers with young children being economically active. In contrast, Luxembourg and Ireland are at the low end of the distribution with 41-42 percent.

Do these differences in maternal labor force participation rates merely reflect differences in the overall levels of economic activity for *all* women within each country? The answer is clearly no; the impact of children on women's employment, that is, the child penalty, also varies from one country to another (Gornick, Meyers, & Ross, 1997, 1998). Figure 8.2 compares the economic activity rate of childless women to that of women with at least one child under the age of five for each country, ranked according to the gap between mothers and childless women. The activity rate of mothers is at least 40 percentage points lower than that of childless women in Luxembourg, Ireland, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. In contrast, there is only an 11-point difference in Portugal and a negligible difference in Denmark.

The number of children also has differential effects on maternal labor force participation across the European Union. Figure 8.3 presents the economic activity rate of mothers aged twenty to thirty-nine by number of children for each country. There is a tremendous drop in maternal labor force participation after women have their first child in the Netherlands, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Spain (in that order). Maternal labor force participation declines more incrementally as the number of children increases in Germany, Italy, and Greece. In contrast, while having one or two children only slightly lowers the employment rate of French women, having three or more children drastically reduces maternal employment. This pattern reflects the degree to which French policy encourages larger families by providing extensive financial incentives for women to care for their children at home (see King, 1998). The French case resembles the patterns found in Belgium and Portugal, but not to the same degree. Most notable, once again, is Denmark, where the number of children has little effect on women's

Table 8.1 National Indicators of the Twelve Member States of the European Union, 1992

	Belgium	Denmark	Germany ^a	Greece	Spain	France	Ireland	Italy	Luxembourg	Netherlands	Portugal	UK
Total fertility rate per woman, 1993	1.6	1.8	1.3	1.4	1.2	1.6	2.0	1.2	1.7	1.6	1.5	1.8
Percentage of women aged 35-39 with no children	17.2	16.3	21.3	12.8	7.1	14.4	11.3	13.0	21.9	22.3	9.4	19.1
Marriage rate	5.8	6.2	5.6	4.7	5.5	4.7	4.5	5.3	6.4	6.2	7.1	6.1
Divorce rate	2.2	2.5	1.7	0.6	0.7	1.9	—	0.5	1.8	2.0	1.3	3.0
Percentage of births outside marriage	11.3	46.4	14.9	2.6	10.5	33.2	18.0	6.8	12.7	12.4	16.1	30.8
Percentage of one-parent families, 1990	14.0	12.3	11.5	7.6	10.0	10.4	14.9	10.3	12.2	10.1	9.3	13.6
Maternal labor force participation rate ^b	69.4	85.2	54.0	47.2	45.3	66.3	42.5	48.6	40.8	46.5	74.6	50.1
Percentage of employed women who work part-time	28.1	36.7	30.7	8.4	13.7	24.5	18.6	11.5	16.6	63.8	11.3	45.0
Gross domestic products per capita using PPPs ^c (in ECU)	17,291	16,645	17,000	9,605	12,202	17,603	12,237	16,465	24,127	16,144	10,265	15,409
Social security expenditure as % of GDP	27.8	31.4	27.3	19.3	22.5	29.2	21.6	25.6	28.0	33.0	17.6	27.2
Expenditure on family benefits as % of GDP	1.9	3.1	2.0	0.2	0.2	2.2	3.2	0.9	2.6	1.6	1.0	2.6
Family benefits as % of social security benefits	7.2	10.2	8.1	1.1	0.9	8.1	15.3	3.5	9.6	5.0	4.7	9.9
Maternity benefits per birth (in ECU)	2,579	6,814	3,349	516	1,506	4,576	2,800	1,346	5,176	1,163	595	2,368
Family benefits per person under the age of 19 (in ECU)	1,104	2,279	1,883	36	59	1,280	872	488	1,954	889	147	1,265
Weeks of paid maternity leave	15	28	14	15	16	16	14	20	16	16	13	18
Year in which women acquired right to vote	1949	1915	1919	1958	1931	1944	1922	1946	1919	1917	1931	1928

^aGermany refers to Unified Germany.

^bMaternal labor force participation rate is the rate of economic activity for women aged 20-39 with at least one child under age 5.

^cPPPs are purchasing power parities that eliminate the differences in price level and the variations in exchange rates, so as to improve the comparison of volumes.

Sources: Eurostat (1995, 1996); OECD (1996).

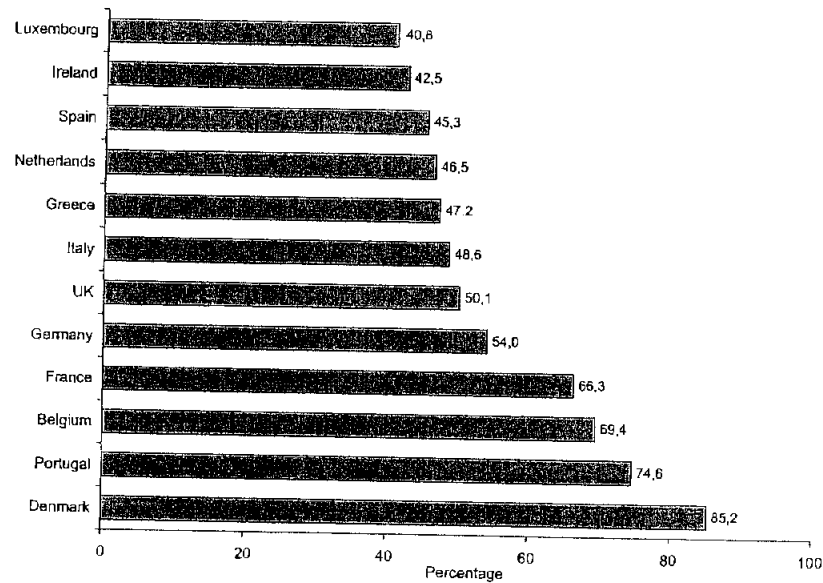


Fig. 8.1 Employment rates for women aged twenty to thirty-nine with at least one child under age five, 1992 (Source: Eurostat, 1995).

employment, presumably because state policies support women's ability to reconcile employment and childrearing.

European women and their governments have responded to work-family dilemmas in different ways, based on national economic, political, and cultural conditions. For example, part-time employment is a more feasible option for combining work and family in the Netherlands than in Greece (see Table 8.1). Countries also diverge in the extent to which they attempt to equalize women's and men's employment prospects, conditions, and pay through equal opportunity legislation and provisions for parental leave and childcare (Gardiner & Leijenaar, 1996; Gornick et al., 1997, 1998; Hantrais & Letablier, 1996). As Gardiner and Leijenaar (1996) point out, the Netherlands became the leader in gender equality legislation in the 1990s, while equalizing mechanisms are rudimentary at best in Greece and Portugal. In order to promote equal opportunities, the European Commission attempts to influence policies on parental leave, childcare, and working time in its member states. National governments, however, have not been unanimous in their support of such measures. For example, the government in the United Kingdom stood firmly against many of the recommended policies until it was recently forced into compliance through European Union Directives (Gardiner & Leijenaar, 1996). At a glance, then, it is clear that the particular

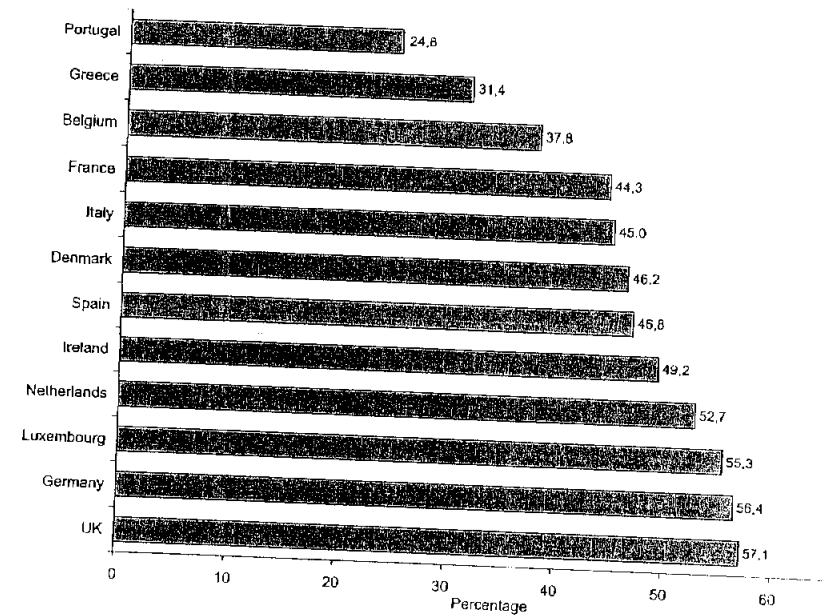


Fig. 8.2 Employment rate for women aged twenty to thirty-nine with no children and with one or more children, 1992 (Source: Eurostat, 1995).

mixture and intensity of policies, in terms of entitlement, financial commitment, and mechanisms for delivery, differ quite substantially among the member states [see Hantrais and Letablier (1996) for details].

Scholars have used a variety of empirical indicators and conceptual schemes related to women's employment to classify European countries into a system of clusters. For example, Ostner and Lewis (1995) argue that the strength of the male-breadwinner norm, as manifested in national policies, determines the extent of European women's employment. They classify European countries into strong, moderate, and weak male-breadwinner states based on tax and social security systems, the level of provisions for public childcare, and the nature of women's labor force participation. They contend that Ireland and Britain are strong male-breadwinner countries because these countries lack widespread public childcare and maternity rights, exhibit gender inequality in public benefit systems, and have lower rates of full-time employment for women. They classify France and Belgium as moderate male-breadwinner countries, and Denmark as a weak male-breadwinner country with much greater provisions for public childcare and parental leave, individual tax and social security arrangements, and high levels of women's labor force participation on a full-time basis.

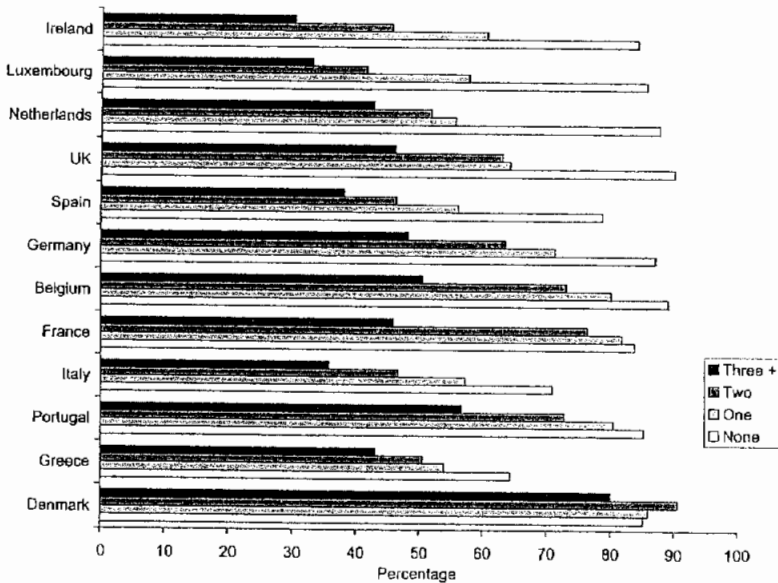


Fig. 8.3 Employment rates of women aged twenty to thirty-nine by number of children, 1992 (Source: Eurostat, 1995).

Gornick et al. (1997) investigate the intensity of state support for maternal employment and arrive at groupings similar to those of Ostner and Lewis (1995). Their research reveals three "loose clusters" among OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries. State support for employed mothers with preschool-age children is highest in France, the Nordic countries (Finland, Denmark, and Sweden), and Belgium, whereas it is lowest in the Anglo-Saxon countries (United Kingdom, Australia, and the United States). Italy, Luxembourg, West Germany, Norway, Canada, and the Netherlands cluster in between the highest and lowest groups. Unfortunately, Gornick et al.'s (1997) analysis of mid- to late-1980s policy data on OECD countries excludes several members of the European Union, namely Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain. Using a more qualitative approach, Hantrais and Letablier (1996) characterize the national governments in Greece, Ireland, Portugal, and Spain, as well as the United Kingdom, as non-interventionist in family affairs because of ideological constraints (Ireland and the United Kingdom) or financial constraints (Greece, Ireland, and Portugal). Thus, these four countries fall into the bottom cluster, which is characterized by weak state support for maternal employment.

These variations in national policies and aggregate statistics should manifest themselves in the public perceptions of children as an obstacle to women's employment. Thus, the level of state support for maternal employment should be reflected in the degree to which individuals consider children an obstacle to women's employment. If this is the case, we would expect that the perception that children pose a problem would be less common in Denmark, Belgium, and France, where state support for maternal employment is strongest and the male-breadwinner norm is not so predominant. Likewise, we would expect that the perception of children as an obstacle would be more common in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain, and Greece, where state support for maternal employment is the weakest and the male-breadwinner norm is relatively strong. Because of the relatively high rate of maternal employment, Portuguese residents may be less likely to view children as an obstacle than residents in other countries with similar levels of weak state support and strong male-breadwinner norms. In Portugal, family and community networks, not the government, provide essential informal support for maternal employment (Hantrais & Letablier, 1996). Thus, we expect perceptions in Portugal as well as those in other moderate countries, namely Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, to fall somewhere in between the two extremes.

INDIVIDUAL DIVERSITY IN THE WORK-FAMILY CONTEXT

An individual's socioeconomic background and ideological viewpoint, irrespective of national context and social policy, can affect whether or not the individual perceives children as problematic for women's employment. Prior research demonstrates that national context alone explains only a limited amount of variation in public opinion. For example, personal characteristics are also powerful determinants of attitudes toward women's employment (Adler & Brayfield, 1996; Panayotova & Brayfield, 1997) and the centrality of children (Jones & Brayfield, 1997). Therefore, regardless of a specific country's policies or its level of women's employment, an individual may believe that women's employment is peripheral to men's breadwinner responsibilities and/or that women should exit the labor market once they become pregnant.

We suspect that individuals who believe that mothers should stay at home to care for young children may regard motherhood and women's employment as mutually exclusive. In other words, traditional ideology mandates that women reduce, or end, their employment (at least temporarily) after they have a child. Thus, we hypothesize that traditional attitudes toward mothering will coincide with the viewpoint that children pose a barrier to women's employment. Likewise, an egalitarian ideology fosters the idea that women with

children should not be limited to the roles of housewife and mother, and thus children should not pose an obstacle to women's employment. Egalitarian-minded individuals are likely to feel that the traditional division of labor, not children per se, unfairly limits women's opportunities in the labor market. In other words, egalitarian-minded individuals may think children hinder women's employment because of structural reality, whereas traditional individuals may think motherhood and employment are not compatible for ideological reasons. At the same time, however, some individuals who feel that mothers should stay at home to take care of their children may be merely reacting to the difficulties of combining employment and childrearing. Such a relationship would indicate that seemingly traditional attitudes toward mothering are actually a practical response to the difficulties faced by contemporary women. Nevertheless, it still implies that childrearing is women's domain, and thus we expect people who believe that mothers should stay at home with young children to be more likely to voice the idea that children are an obstacle to women's employment.

In all countries, women bear a disproportionate responsibility for childrearing. This means that women should be more sensitive to the difficulties posed by combining employment and family activities, whether they have experienced these tensions firsthand or anticipate having to reconcile these issues at some point later in their life. Hence, we expect that women in all twelve countries will be more likely than men to indicate that children are an obstacle to women's employment.

We anticipate that other personal traits also will affect perceptions of children as an obstacle to women's employment. Thus, we will examine the net effects of an individual's employment status, family characteristics, age, religiosity, and urban residence. We predict that these personal traits will not have uniform effects in all twelve countries because the rate of employment and the degree to which women are able to combine employment and childrearing varies greatly. However, in general, we expect age and religiosity to reduce the perception of children as an obstacle because older people and religious people will tend to view motherhood as a full-time occupation for women. For many of these individuals, motherhood probably precludes women's employment. Also, older cohorts may feel that younger women today have more support from governments and/or from husbands than did previous generations. In addition, employed people, married people, and parents should be more aware of the difficulties encountered in combining employment and children. In contrast, we expect urban dwellers and people with higher family incomes to be less likely to perceive children as problematic because of the greater availability and diversity of childcare and other domestic services in cities and, for people with money, the access to financial resources to purchase these services.

DATA SOURCE

Data come from the thirty-ninth wave of the Eurobarometer survey (Reif & Melich, 1993). This sample represents the national populations, aged fifteen years and older, of twelve European Union member states in 1993.⁴ In each country, the basic sample design consists of a multistage, random technique, with probability of sample selection being proportional to population size and density. The original multinational sample contained 13,078 respondents, but we lost 1,879 respondents because of missing information on at least one of the variables in our analysis. Thus, after deletion of missing values, our analytic sample consists of 11,199 respondents.⁵

VARIABLES & MEASUREMENT

Public Perceptions of the Work-Family Interface

In this chapter, we focus on public opinion about one aspect of the work-family interface: the perception of children as an obstacle to women's employment. The 1993 Eurobarometer survey asked respondents if "having children is an obstacle to the working life of the man," and if "having children is an obstacle to the working life of the woman." Based on responses to these two items, we created a dichotomous variable representing individuals who perceive children as a problem to women's employment in particular. We coded this variable as 1 when respondents indicated that children limit the labor force participation of women, but not that of men. We coded all other responses as 0, including situations when respondents indicated (a) "don't know" to either item, (b) children pose an obstacle for both women and men (hence, children are not solely a woman's problem), (c) children pose an obstacle only to the working life of the man, and (d) children do not pose an obstacle to the working lives of women or men.

National Context

Our analysis concentrates on cross-national variation. Because our dependent variable is dichotomous, we employed logistic regression to model the simultaneous impact of national context and personal characteristics on perceptions of children. For the first set of multivariate equations, we used the cross-national sample with all 11,199 respondents combined together to estimate the effect of national context net of the compositional differences in the national samples. To do this, we created a series of dummy variables that represent a respondent's country of residence. We used respondents from Denmark as the omitted reference group because maternal employment is highest, and thus the child penalty is lowest, in this country (see Figures

8.1–8.3). After controlling for variation in individual-level characteristics, the coefficients for the country variables represent the degree to which national context relates to perceptions of children *above and beyond* personal traits. Of course, this statistical technique does not allow us to identify which particular aspects of national context influence public opinion. Next, we estimated the multivariate model separately for each country to ascertain how individual-level characteristics affect the likelihood of perceiving children as an obstacle *within* each country.

Individual Characteristics

We also examine the simultaneous net effects of nine individual-level factors on the perception of children as an obstacle to women’s employment:

- gender of respondent (female = 1, male = 0);
- whether the respondent is a parent (coded 1, otherwise 0);
- age of respondent (years);
- whether the respondent considers him/herself as religious (coded 1, otherwise 0);
- employment status, as measured by two dummy variables—professional occupation and nonprofessional occupation—as compared to respondents who are not employed;
- urban dweller (lives in city = 1, otherwise = 0);
- marital status, as measured by two dummy variables—married/partner and divorced/separated/widowed—as compared to never-married respondents;
- family income, as measured by three dummy variables—lower, middle, and missing information—as compared to higher family incomes; and
- personal attitude toward maternal employment (“Is it better for a child if the mother stays home to look after the child, when he/she is young, or is it better that the mother continues to work outside the home?”) mother should stay home = 1, otherwise = 0).

Table 8.2 presents descriptive statistics for these individual characteristics within each national sample.

RESULTS

Figure 8.4 illustrates the national variation in perceptions of children as an obstacle to women’s employment. Public perceptions do not simply mirror differences in state support for maternal employment. Children are much more likely to be viewed as problematic in the United Kingdom, Germany, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands than in Belgium, Greece, and Portugal.

Table 8.2 Percentage Distributions of Categorical Variables and Means and Standard Deviations of Age, by Country of Residence

	Belgium	Denmark	Germany	Greece	Spain	France	Ireland	Italy	Luxembourg	Netherlands	Portugal	UK
Female	53	50	50	50	52	51	51	54	47	48	52	53
Child(ren)	68	71	73	65	58	66	65	64	67	67	69	70
Age	44.48 (18.49)	43.18 (16.94)	44.97 (17.18)	42.56 (17.24)	42.41 (18.23)	43.54 (18.04)	42.73 (18.43)	43.91 (18.57)	43.15 (18.07)	43.01 (17.30)	44.43 (18.50)	44.04 (18.49)
Religious	64	53	43	91	68	44	71	88	67	51	92	59
Employment status	7	14	14	9	9	13	6	11	18	13	7	11
Professional occupation	43	41	39	41	36	39	34	34	32	36	44	37
Not in labor force ^a	50	45	46	50	55	48	60	55	50	51	49	52
Urban dweller	27	44	69	41	40	59	40	29	28	72	18	57
Marital status	62	65	64	66	57	62	59	59	67	69	64	62
Married/partner	17	13	18	9	11	15	11	11	9	11	11	15
Previously married	20	22	18	25	32	23	30	30	24	20	26	23
Never-married ^b	21	31	30	23	26	28	19	20	20	26	30	21
Income	17	26	23	23	25	26	18	22	24	28	34	17
Lower family income	18	34	35	27	21	27	22	25	23	31	27	27
Middle family income	44	8	12	20	28	20	41	33	32	14	8	35
Upper family income ^c	72	68	89	76	76	79	81	85	88	85	91	85
Missing income	858	837	1,794	954	889	863	836	925	412	771	933	1,127
Mom stay at home												
N												

^aIndividuals not in the labor force serve as the comparison group.

^bSingle individuals serve as the comparison group.

^cIndividuals in the upper third income category serve as the comparison group.

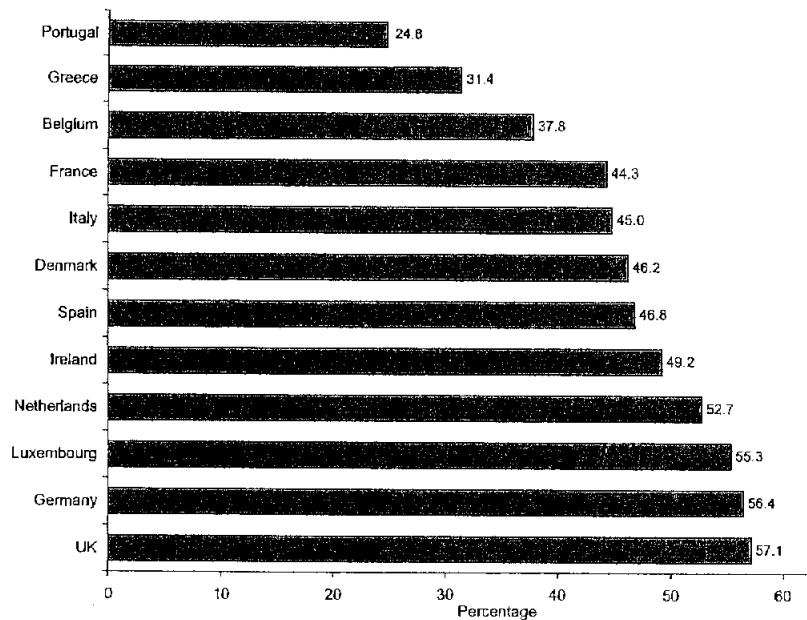


Fig. 8.4 Children perceived as obstacle to women's employment.

Portuguese respondents, at 25 percent, are least likely to consider children as an obstacle to women's employment, while at 57 percent the British are at the high end. These figures confirm the link between social structure and attitudes at the two extremes. At the high end, the lack of infrastructural supports for maternal employment in the United Kingdom heightens the public perception of children as problematic. At the low end, the high level of maternal employment and strong informal networks of support in Portugal lead to the perception that children are not much of a barrier to women's employment. The association between social structure and attitudes is quite complex and the countries do not clearly cluster into our hypothesized groups. For example, contrary to our expectations, a relatively high percentage of Danish respondents (46 percent) view children as an obstacle, despite the highest maternal employment rate and strong governmental support. Likewise, a relatively low percentage of Greek respondents (31 percent) view children as an obstacle, despite weak governmental support and a moderate level of maternal employment.

We also find that there is a striking gender gap in attitudes; women are significantly more likely than men to view children as an obstacle to women's

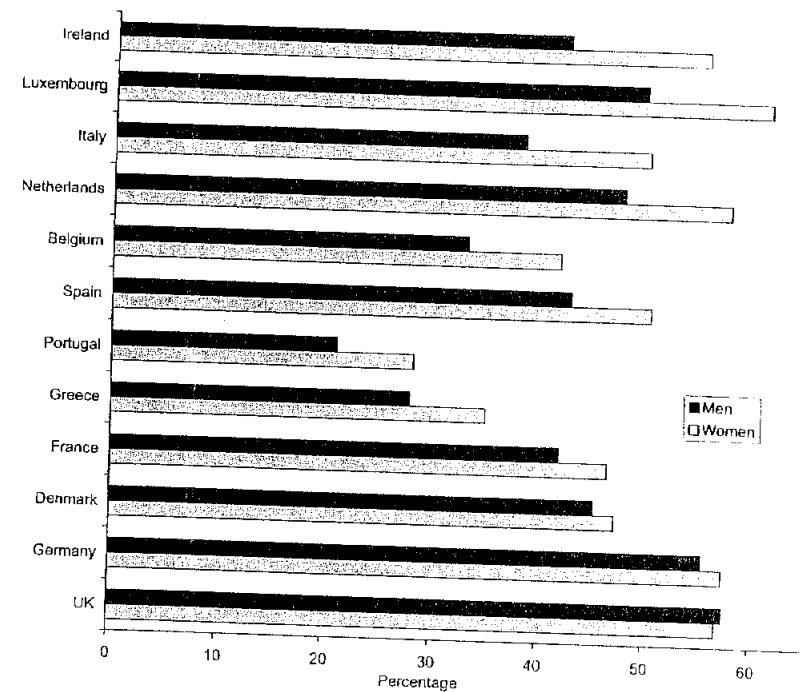


Fig. 8.5 Gender gap in perceptions of children as an obstacle to women's employment.

employment in eight out of twelve countries (Figure 8.5, Table 8.3). The gap between women's and men's perceptions is greatest in Ireland, Luxembourg, and Italy. However, the gender gap is not significant in the United Kingdom, Germany, Denmark, or France (Table 8.3). The nonsignificant results are somewhat perplexing, given that women are primary caregivers in all of these countries, including Denmark. In Germany and the United Kingdom, over 50 percent of both women and men report that children pose an obstacle to women's employment, and this is a relatively high rate. Men in these two countries may be highly sensitive to the tensions surrounding maternal employment, and thus we observe the lack of gender differences. It is also possible that women and men in Denmark and France are equally knowledgeable of governmental attempts to reconcile employment and child-rearing.

Next, we examine whether the observed cross-national patterns of public opinion are simply the consequence of compositional differences within the

Table 8.3 Percentage Who Perceive Children as Obstacle to Women's Employment

	Women	Men	Gap	t-ratio
Belgium	41.91 (451) ^a	33.17 (407)	8.74	-2.64**
Denmark	47.24 (417)	45.24 (420)	2.00	-.58
Germany	57.38 (894)	55.44 (900)	1.94	-.83
Greece	35.01 (477)	27.88 (477)	7.13	-2.38*
Spain	50.44 (458)	42.92 (431)	7.52	-2.25*
France	46.50 (443)	41.90 (420)	4.60	-1.36
Ireland	55.63 (426)	42.44 (410)	13.19	-3.84***
Italy	50.20 (496)	38.46 (429)	11.74	-3.60***
Luxembourg	61.54 (195)	49.77 (217)	11.77	-2.41*
Netherlands	57.88 (368)	47.89 (403)	9.99	-2.79**
Portugal	28.19 (486)	21.03 (447)	7.16	-2.54*
United Kingdom	56.83 (593)	57.49 (534)	0.66	0.22
Total	49.02 (5,704)	42.93 (5,495)	6.09	-6.47***

^aSample size.* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

national samples. Table 8.4 presents the results of two logistic regression equations. In the first equation we regress country of residence on perception of children as an obstacle, with Denmark as the omitted reference country. In the second equation we add all of the personal characteristics of the respondents.

The results in Table 8.4 suggest that national differences in public opinion cannot be attributed solely to compositional differences in personal traits across the national samples. Respondents in Belgium, Greece, and Portugal are less likely, and respondents in Germany, Luxembourg, and the United Kingdom are more likely, than Danish respondents to view children as an obstacle to women's employment. However, there are no significant differences in public opinion between respondents in Denmark and those in France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain, after personal traits are

Table 8.4 Logistic Regression Predicting Whether Children Are an Obstacle to Women's Employment

	1	2
National context		
Belgium ^a	-.35***	-.27**
Germany ^a	.41***	.30***
Greece ^a	-.63***	-.58***
Spain ^a	.02	.06
France ^a	-.08	-.14
Ireland ^a	.12	.15
Italy ^a	-.06	-.04
Luxembourg ^a	.36**	.33**
Netherlands ^a	.26*	.17
Portugal ^a	-.96***	-.98***
United Kingdom ^a	.44***	.40***
Individual demographic characteristics		
Female		.33***
Child(ren)		.08
Age		-.00**
Religious		-.17***
Professional occupation ^b		.24***
Nonprofessional occupation ^b		-.09
Urban dweller		.05
Married/partner ^c		-.03
Previously married ^c		-.06
Lower Family Income ^d		-.33***
Middle Family Income ^d		-.13*
Missing Income ^d		-.30***
Attitudinal item		
Mom stay at home		.48***
Constant	-.15*	-.27*
Model chi-square	454.65***	225.55***
Correctly classified (%)	58.22	60.18
N	11,199	11,199

^aCompared to respondents in Denmark.^bCompared to nonemployed respondents.^cCompared to never-married respondents.^dCompared to respondents with higher family incomes.* $p \leq .05$. ** $p \leq .01$. *** $p \leq .001$.

taken into account. Once again, this empirical pattern does not match our hypothesized clusters for national context because we expected respondents in Denmark, Belgium, and France to be least likely and respondents in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Spain, and Greece to be most likely to view children as an obstacle to women's employment. Our findings suggest that, although national context matters, public opinion is not shaped by national

policy alone. Consequently, we are unable to sort out the precise empirical linkages between national context and public opinion.

Analysis of the effects of the individual-level characteristics confirm our hypothesis that women are more likely than men to perceive children as an obstacle to women's employment, net of national context and other personal traits. When we estimate the statistical model for each separate country (see Table 8.5), we see that the initial bivariate gender gaps are sustained in the multivariate analysis; gender significantly affects perceptions in nine out of twelve member states, even after controlling for the effects of other individual characteristics. In fact, the multivariate analysis reveals a significant gender gap in France, which was not evident in the initial bivariate analysis. We also checked for the possibility that gender may interact with country of residence and/or other personal characteristics in the combined cross-national sample (results not shown). We found no interactive effects by gender; the empirical model does not differ for women and men. It is also worth pointing out that the overall fit of the model is not good in Denmark and Germany (as indicated by the insignificant chi-square statistics), and thus, we should interpret the lack of a gender gap in these two countries with caution.

As predicted, we find the belief that mothers should stay home to care for young children coincides with the perception of children as an obstacle to women's employment, net of gender in seven countries: Belgium, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Despite strong state support for maternal employment in Belgium and France, traditional views of motherhood reinforce perceptions of children as an obstacle. People who believe women should care for their children at home also feel that motherhood conflicts with employment, despite governmental provisions for parental leave. Apparently, people with traditional attitudes consider childcare at home by the mother to be the solution to work and family problems. This finding is insightful because it shows that (a) seemingly traditional attitudes toward motherhood may be a practical response to the difficulties posed by juggling employment and childrearing and (b) many individuals view childcare as an exclusively *female* concern.

Turning to the other personal traits, we find that the combined model examining attitudes for all twelve countries shows that age has a negative effect on perceptions; older respondents are less likely to view children as an obstacle to women's employment (Table 8.4). However, this effect is limited to three (traditional) countries: Greece, Spain, and Ireland (see Table 8.5). As stated previously, the limited labor force experience of older cohorts of women, especially during their earlier years of childrearing, may prevent older generations from considering children as an obstacle to the working life of younger women today.

In line with our hypothesis, religiosity has a significant negative effect on attitudes in the combined cross-national model, and this relationship is more

Table 8.5 Logistic Regression Predicting Whether Children Are an Obstacle to Women's Employment, by Country of Residence

	Belgium	Denmark	Germany	Greece	Spain	France	Ireland	Italy	Luxembourg	Netherlands	Portugal	UK
Female	.42**	.16	.09	.50**	.41**	.30*	.54***	.54***	.50*	.53**	.39*	.16
Child(ren)	.15	-.10	-.05	.18	.15	.32	.35	-.46*	.31	.10	.13	.32*
Age	-.00	.01	-.01	-.01*	-.02**	-.00	-.01*	-.00	.01	-.01	.00	-.00
Religious	-.12	-.19	.16	-.61*	-.25	-.18	-.07	-.42*	-.60*	-.34*	-.72**	-.24*
Employment status												
Professional occupation ^a	.12	.20	.18	.14	.47*	.28	-.01	.45*	.25	.31	-.26	.25
Nonprofessional occupation ^a	-.14	-.36*	-.05	-.15	.08	.28*	.06	-.13	-.42	-.01	-.47*	-.03
Urban dweller	-.07	.06	.02	.07	-.04	.32*	-.01	.17	-.01	.20	.31	-.20
Marital status												
Married/partner ^b	.24	.04	.02	-.27	-.23	-.26	-.17	.57*	-.33	.00	.40	-.29
Previously married ^b	.21	-.20	.10	-.36	-.13	-.38	.16	.65*	-.51	-.05	-.12	-.44
Income												
Lower family income ^c	-.35	-.51*	-.19	-.46*	.28	-.13	-.20	-.54*	-.38	-.42*	-.32	-.75**
Middle family income ^c	-.14	-.26	-.14	.23	.26	-.22	-.50*	-.22	.08	-.21	.04	-.18
Missing incomes	-.31	-.28	-.05	-.41*	-.00	.04	-.31	-.16	-.63*	-.63*	-.11	-.71**
Mom stay at home	.78***	.16	.37*	.77***	.72***	.59**	.78***	.20	.59*	-.02	-.26	.75**
Constant	-1.08***	-.19	.16	-.29	-.18	-.93**	-.24	-.21	.03	-.31	-.58	.32
Model chi-square	37.44***	20.10*	20.21*	59.14***	42.55***	26.22*	41.30***	40.95***	30.16***	31.80***	34.68***	56.44**
Correctly classified (%)	62.59	56.51	57.92	66.24	61.08	57.59	58.49	58.59	61.89	57.85	75.46	60.07
N	858	837	1,794	954	889	863	836	925	412	771	933	1,127

^aIndividuals not in the labor force serve as the comparison group.

^bSingle individuals serve as the comparison group.

^cIndividuals in the upper third income category serve as the comparison group.

* $p \leq .10$. ** $p \leq .05$. *** $p \leq .001$.

consistent than age: religious people are less likely to perceive children as problematic in Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. Perhaps in these countries the traditional and pronatalist influence of the church has led religious individuals to believe that (a) children are a blessing and have no negative connotations whatsoever, and (b) childrearing has priority over employment for women. Thus, it may preclude the perception of children as problematic in any way at all for religious people.

Although employment status is significant in the combined cross-national equations, it does not appear to have a statistically significant effect in many of the separate country equations. In the combined cross-national model, persons employed in professional occupations are more likely than nonemployed individuals to indicate that children complicate women's employment life, while individuals employed in nonprofessional occupations are less likely to do so. However, the effects of professional employment are only marginally significant in two countries, Spain and Italy, while the negative effects of nonprofessional employment are significant only in Denmark and Portugal. And in France, nonprofessional employment has a marginally significant positive effect. Likewise, urban residence has no significant effect in eleven out of the twelve countries. Only in France do urban dwellers differ from rural residents in their perceptions of children as an obstacle. Moreover, the direction of this effect contradicts our hypothesis. These patterns suggest that the effects of employment status and urban residence are more varied *within* each country than across countries. Regionalism may be more salient than national context, especially in the case of Italy with its tremendous economic differences between northern and southern regions and in the case of Germany with its vestiges of reunification differences between East and West (see Adler & Brayfield, 1996).

Surprisingly, neither marital status nor being a parent relates to perceptions of children as an obstacle to women's employment. This holds true for both women and men when we test for interactions between gender and marital status and between gender and parental status (results not shown). This finding suggests that an individual's opinion is not necessarily determined by direct personal experience with marriage or parenthood, but may be shaped by general impressions gained through indirect observations and the anticipation of problems. Alternatively, this finding could suggest that, in some countries at least, individuals with children may not have experienced any trouble reconciling women's employment and childrearing activities, either because of generous state policies or because the women chose not to combine these activities.

The effects of the categorical family income variable are somewhat inconsistent. It appears that persons in the lower- and middle-income groups are significantly less likely than persons in the highest income group to indicate

that children are an obstacle (see Table 8.4). However, the effects of the income variables are absent from many of the separate country models (see Table 8.5). The effects of belonging to the middle-income group are only significant in Ireland. Lower income only has significant effects in four countries: Denmark, Greece, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Perhaps the women in lower-income groups have fewer employment opportunities in these countries or, alternatively, income replacement provided by maternity leave in these countries operates in ways that benefit lower-income individuals the most. Notably, income inequality and redistributive social policies are quite varied across the five countries, making it difficult to sort through the potential associations that result in these differential patterns.

CONCLUSIONS

We set out to examine whether public perceptions of children as an obstacle to women's employment reflect variations in European national policies and aggregate statistics. We expected the level of state support for maternal employment to match the degree to which individuals consider children an obstacle to women's employment. Surprisingly, national perceptions do not appear to coincide with levels of state support for maternal employment. Our research reveals great diversity in public perceptions across the twelve West European countries. People in Portugal and Greece are less likely, and people in the United Kingdom and Germany are more likely, than people in the other countries to perceive children as an obstacle to women's employment. The empirical results do not support our hypothesized clusters; we expected people in Denmark, Belgium, and France to be least likely to view children as an obstacle because of strong state support for combining child-rearing and maternal employment (Gornick et al., 1997, 1998; Hantrais & Letablier, 1996). Rather than alleviate the problems faced by employed mothers, perhaps state policies designed to facilitate maternal employment serve to heighten public awareness of the so-called child penalty. In addition, these three countries—Denmark, Belgium, and France—have relatively long traditions of generous family policies, which may have increased public expectations relative to services needed to successfully reconcile employment and family responsibilities.

Because women in all countries bear the disproportionate responsibility for raising children, we are not surprised that women are more likely than men to indicate that having children curtails women's employment opportunities. However, after controlling for the other personal characteristics, the net gender differences are not statistically significant in Denmark, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Given the relatively high recognition of tensions surrounding maternal employment in Germany and the United Kingdom, the lack of

gender differences in these countries may be due to the fact that men are more sensitive to the idea that children often pose obstacles to women's labor force participation. Although future research should explore this possibility, we suggest that insignificance of gender as a determinant of Danish and German perceptions should be interpreted with caution because, as we noted earlier, the empirical model does not successfully predict Danish and German opinions about children.

The majority of respondents in all countries indicate that the mother should stay at home with her child the first few years, and, after gender, this variable was the most consistent predictor of attitudes across the twelve separate country models. Individuals with this belief are also more likely to agree that children pose an obstacle to women's employment in seven countries: Belgium, Germany, Greece, Spain, France, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. Once again, it is difficult to establish clear patterns across countries. For example, it is not surprising that relatively shorter paid maternity leave in countries such as Germany, Greece, Ireland, and Belgium (less than sixteen weeks, see Table 8.1) leads individuals who believe that mothers should stay at home to think that children are an obstacle to women's employment. At the same time, these same relationships should apply to individuals in Portugal, but they do not, mainly because alternative sources of support are available via family and community networks. These findings suggest that not only do national family and employment policies have complex effects on individual attitudes, but cultural differences in family ideology may also play a role in how public opinions are formed.

In short, our research illustrates the complexities involved in attempts to disentangle the relationships among national context, personal experiences, and public perceptions. Awareness of these complexities is becoming increasingly important as researchers approach the daunting task of examining the processes of policy and attitude formation in a supranational structure like the European Union. As national political and economic boundaries are eroding, the question arises whether unique social, cultural, and attitudinal patterns will persist. Future research needs to identify which dimensions of national context, including cultural mandates, may shape public opinion about women's employment and the place of children in society. For example, what are the relationships among fertility rates, childlessness, family configurations, governmental expenditures on family benefits, gender equity policies, economic development, and attitudes toward children? Future surveys should also untangle the differences in beliefs about what the consequences of children *should be*, in terms of women's priorities, versus *what already exists*, especially in terms of inadequate childminding services, versus *future possibilities*. The more challenging step, however, is to sort out the causal mechanisms between macroscopic phenomena and the formation of individual attitudes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Chantal Remery and the editors for their comments on an earlier version of this chapter, which was presented at the workshop "Women's Employment in a Comparative Perspective" at the Department of Sociology, Utrecht University, The Netherlands, on May 13–14, 1998, and at the ninety-third annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco, California, August 21–25, 1998.

NOTES

1. The Treaty of Rome refers to the 1957 accord between Belgium, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. This treaty initiated the economic unification of Europe by establishing the European Economic Community, the precursor to the European Union.
2. Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom joined the European Community in 1973, with Greece following in 1981, and Portugal and Spain in 1986. Austria, Finland, and Sweden were not formally admitted to the European Union until 1995.
3. We present employment rates for 1992, as opposed to more recent estimates, because our survey data on perceptions are from 1993.
4. Finland and Norway also participated in this survey, but Finnish respondents were not asked any of the questions concerning family life. We exclude Norwegian respondents because Norway has withdrawn its application to the European Union and our analytic objective is to examine attitudes within the European Union.
5. The country breakdown of the 1,879 deleted respondents with missing data is 154 Belgium, 162 Denmark, 298 Germany, 49 Greece, 133 Spain, 156 France, 172 Ireland, 114 Italy, 102 Luxembourg, 233 the Netherlands, 67 Portugal, and 239 United Kingdom.

REFERENCES

- Adler, M. A. (1997). Social Change and Declines in Marriage and Fertility in Eastern Germany. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 59(1):37–49.
- Adler, M. A., & Brayfield, A. (1996). East-West Differences in Attitudes about Employment and Family in Germany. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 37(2):245–60.
- European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment, Industrial Relations and Social Affairs (1994). The European Union and the Family. *Social Europe*, 1.
- Eurostat (1995). *Women and Men in the European Union: A Statistical Portrait*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- Eurostat (1996). *National Accounts ESA 1970–1994*. Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- Gardiner, F., & Leijenaar, M. (1997). The Timid and the Bold: Analysis of the 'Woman-Friendly State' in Ireland and the Netherlands. In F. Gardiner (Ed.), *Sex Equality Policy in Western Europe* (pp. 60–87). London: Routledge.
- Gornick, J., Meyers, M., & Ross, K. (1997). Supporting the Employment of Mothers:

- Policy Variation Across Fourteen Welfare States. *Journal of European Social Policy*, 7(1):45–70.
- Gornick, J., Meyers, M., & Ross, K. (1998). Public Policies and the Employment of Mothers: A Cross-National Study. *Social Science Quarterly*, 79(1):35–54.
- Hantrais, L., & Letablier, M.-T. (1996). *Families and Family Policy in Europe*. New York: Longman.
- Jones, R. K., & Brayfield, A. (1997). Life's Greatest Joy?: European Attitudes Toward the Centrality of Children. *Social Forces*, 75(4):1239–70.
- King, L. (1998). France Needs Children: Pronatalism, Nationalism and Women's Equity. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 39(1):33–52.
- Monk, J., & García-Ramon, M. D. (Eds.) (1996). *Women of the European Union: The Politics of Work and Daily Life*. London: Routledge.
- OECD (1996). *OECD Economies at a Glance: Structural Indicators*. Paris: OECD.
- Ostner, I., & Lewis, J. (1995). Gender and the Evolution of European Social Policies. In S. Liebfreid & P. Pierson (Eds.), *European Social Policy: Between Fragmentation and Integration* (pp. 159–194). Washington, DC: Brookings Institute.
- Panayotova, E., & Brayfield, A. (1997). National Context and Gender Ideology: Attitudes toward Women's Employment in Hungary and the United States. *Gender & Society*, 11(5):627–55.
- Reif, K., & Melich, A. (1993). *Euro-Barometer 39.0: European Community Policies and Family Life, March–April 1993* (computer file). Conducted by INRA (Europe), Brussels; produced by Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, Ann Arbor, MI; distributed by Zentralarchiv für empirische Sozialforschung, Köln, Germany/Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, Ann Arbor, MI.