Escaping the parent trap. How family policies explain cross-national variation in the relation between early motherhood and long-term NEET

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Extended abstract

Introduction

In general, women are more likely to become Not in Employment, Education or Training [NEET] (Eurofound, 2016). A common explanation in many countries is the voluntary or involuntary inactivity associated with young motherhood. NEETs are disproportionately likely to suffer long-term socioeconomic marginalization, choose criminal careers, experience, and encounter severe mental and physical health problems (Bynner & Parsons, 2002; Chen, 2011; Coles et al., 2002; OECD, 2010). Especially when youth become NEET for an extensive period of time, the consequences can be quite severe (Eurofound, 2012).

For some young women, motherhood can be a route towards long-time socioeconomic inactivity and dependency on income generated by partners, family, or social welfare. Various institutional theories assume that the extent to which this is the case, depends strongly on institutional characteristics. For example, family allowances may enable women to disengage from the labour market to take care of their children. This may be problematic if the decision to temporarily step back from the labour market would be more likely to result in persistent, involuntary inactivity. On the other hand, public services for early childhood education and care (ECEC) may facilitate combining (young) motherhood with employment, training or enrolment in education. However, the use of family policies are not equally used by all mothers, e.g. it differs across education levels, and this should be taken into account as well. We aim to answer the following research questions:

1. **To what extent does the relationship between motherhood and NEET status differ between countries?**
2. **To what extent can the cross-national variation of this relation be explained by contextual differences in family policies?**
3. **To what extent does education level of the mothers play a role in the moderating effect of family policies?**

To answer these research questions, we analyse data from the EU LFS 2005 and 2010 ad hoc module ‘Reconciliation between work and family life’. This dataset combines information from the original EU LFS with specific topical data on gender ideology and work-related questions after childbirth. The data
is collected in 28 EU member states and we will look at women aged 16-30. We use random slope multilevel designs to test the macro-micro hypotheses against cross-national data, specifically focusing on cross-level interactions between contextual characteristics of family policies and individual characteristics.

**Hypotheses**

The first hypothesis is about the relationship between motherhood and the probability of becoming long-term NEET. After childbirth, mothers have to re-evaluate the division of labour and household-tasks. Although the general tendency of young couples is that they have more egalitarian attitudes, after childbirth the division of labour and household-tasks tends to become more traditional (P. E. Becker & Moen, 1999; Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Cowan et al., 1985; van der Lippe, 2000). This means that men become the primary breadwinner and women reduce their working hours - or even stop working - to take care of the children. According to the new home economics (G. S. Becker, 1981) and the resource-bargaining approach (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Hiller, 1984) this is due to rational and economic considerations. The former theory argues that on the one hand it is better specialize in one main task, e.g. housework or labour. While the latter states that partners will bring up their resources to the bargaining table to ‘buy out’ their domestic work. For example, they argue that they earn more than the woman, so it makes more sense that the woman stays at home to take care of the child. However, financial security is one of the main reasons why women return to work and these theories assume that the earnings of the partner are enough to pay living expenses. Norms and doing gender represent another set of explanations (Evertsson, 2014). However, still mothers are less independent and have relatively less time to spend on education or employment than childless-women. Therefore, we expect that:

- **Hypothesis 1:** Young women who have become mother are more likely to become long-term NEET than young women without children.

Family policies within a country will influence the cost-benefit analysis mothers make. Certain family policies, such as reconciliation policies, will facilitate that mothers can combine motherhood and education or employment. For instance, women with children will be less likely to give up their work after childbirth if the parental leave and childcare policies within the country are well arranged. However, previous studies showed that the use of in particular childcare is socially stratified in most developed countries (Ghysels & Van Lancker, 2011; Van Lancker, 2013, 2018). Highly educated mothers are more likely to use childcare services than lower educated mothers. Therefore, we hypothesise that:

- **Hypothesis 2:** The higher the maternity leave benefits within a country, the less likely it is that young mothers become long-term NEET and this is stronger for highly educated mothers.
- **Hypothesis 3:** The higher the availability of childcare within a country, the less likely it is that young mothers become long-term NEET and this is stronger for highly educated mothers.
On the other hand, some policies might financially support women to stay at home and take care of the children. We expect that when the family allowances and tax benefits are relatively high, employment or obtaining a (higher) educational degree is less relevant for mothers. Again, we expect an interaction with education level. For highly educated women, the family allowance expenditures and family tax benefits will not outweigh the benefits of (expected) earnings and therefore the financial support from the government is less important for their decision-making process. Thus, we hypothesise that:

- **Hypothesis 4:** The higher the family allowances within a country, the more likely it is that young mothers become long-term NEET, and this is stronger for low-educated mothers.
- **Hypothesis 5:** The higher the family tax benefits within a country, the more likely it is that young mothers become long-term NEET, and this is stronger for low-educated mothers.

**Contribution**
This paper contributes to the literature on youth inactivity, specifically among young mothers. First, most research on motherhood focuses on unemployment rather than the whole concept of NEET. NEET is conceptually related to youth unemployment, but also differs fundamentally. The NEET definition is broader; it includes the share of all young people who are disengaged from both the labour market and education, whether they search for jobs or not. However, it has certain weaknesses of its own. For example, it lumps together a highly heterogeneous group of young people, who may be inactive for very different reasons. We disentangle a part of this group by focussing specifically on women, and the relationship with children.

Secondly, previous literature has shown that women with children are more likely to become NEET. However, to date, it is still ill-understood why this is the case. We assume that NEET risks plausibly arise from interactions between individual (life-course) characteristics and countries’ institutional context. Our paper contributes towards existing research by focussing on the influence of family related policies on the relation motherhood and NEET. Moreover, we also take into account that family policies are not equally used by all mothers and that the use of it differs across education levels.
References


