

Even in 'conservative' West Germany, four fifths of mothers work

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A study of 500 couples shows that only a fifth (21%) of couples born between 1956 and 1965 in 'conservative West Germany' followed the traditional model of having a stay-at-home mum and a male breadwinner as their children grew up. Oxford University researcher Laura Langner analysed decades of SOEP data gathered by the German Institute for Economic Research (DIW), in which households were interviewed on a yearly basis.

She found that four-fifths of mothers returned to work either part-time or full-time, but often not before the children reached their teens. The paper says these findings are surprising given the conservative attitudes towards childcare revealed in another study showing that even in 2002, 51% of West Germans believed that a pre-school child suffered if the mother was employed (Steiber & Haas 2010).

All of the [couples](#) studied had a family where the youngest child was no older than 21. The analysis shows that 34% of the women worked at least part-time, 36% worked full-time, and 6.8 % of couples 'took turns', with the mother's [working hours](#) later overtaking the father's. The study further reveals that of the 36% of parents who re-entered dual full-time employment, one third later reversed this decision. One reason, suggests the paper, could be a lack of full-time childcare or that women brought up in a conservative environment did not want to be labelled as a 'Rabenmutter', meaning a bad or 'raven mother'.

The findings suggest that couples moved back into dual employment as soon as they were able, particularly when the mother was highly educated. Highly educated parents were significantly more likely to try to return to working full time than in couples where parents had low levels of education. The study says it may be because highly qualified couples are more likely to be able to afford childcare and a cleaner in a country with a low level of institutional support.

Study author Laura Langner, from the Centre for Time Use Research in the Department of Sociology, said: 'In this study, over a third of mothers who tried to get back into full-time employment later reverse this decision. This may indicate not a lack of will but the need for family-friendly policies. In 2013, the German government introduced an enforceable right to childcare provision from the age of one upwards. The provision of Ganztagschulen (whole day schools rather than schools that shut at 2pm in the afternoon) has also been increased. The findings

suggest that, because of these changes in policy many more couples are likely to choose the option of dual career paths in the coming years.'

The study shows that an increase in working hours for the mothers in eventual dual career couples and couples who 'took turns' reached a maximum (of about 40 hours on average), when their youngest child was in their late teens. For the 'taking turns' couples, men's working hours decreased, on average, from above 40 hours in early parenthood to 30 hours in the child's late teens. For the dual career couples, both partners worked between 40-45 hours each from when the child was four years old, on average. The mother's average working week in couples where the father was the main breadwinner and the mother was part-time, was 20 hours once the youngest child was in their late teens.

The study finds that across parents' lives, at least seven different patterns of work emerged: a dual career, an eventual dual career, a male breadwinner with a mother working part-time, a male breadwinner with a housewife, a male breadwinner with the mother trying to work full-time but returning to the part-time employment, a mother trying to work but returning to the role as a housewife again, and couples taking turns in who worked the most hours.

More information: "Within-couple specialisation in paid work: A long-term pattern? A dual trajectory approach to linking lives," *Advances in Life Course Research*, Available online 16 February 2015, ISSN 1040-2608, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2015.02.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2015.02.002)

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