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Parental Leave Policy and Gender Attitudes

Olivier B. Bargain
University of Bordeaux, IUF and IZA@LISER

Julie Le Vot
University of Bordeaux

Nicolas Hérault
University of Bordeaux, IZA@LISER and University of Melbourne

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Abstract

This paper examines whether family policy can shape gender attitudes. We exploit the introduction of a paid parental leave (PPL) scheme in Australia in 2011 and use panel data to study changes in women's gender attitudes around childbirth. Prior to the reform, childbirth is associated with a shift toward more traditional attitudes. This pattern is reversed following the introduction of PPL, with exposed mothers becoming more egalitarian. These attitudinal changes are accompanied by increased post-birth employment and hours worked. Heterogeneity analyses are consistent with mechanisms whereby the policy both legitimizes women's dual role as workers and caregivers and supports continued labor market attachment. The findings highlight how family policies can influence both gender role attitudes and labor market behavior.

JEL classification

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Keywords

gender role attitudes, paid parental leave, labor market attachment, Australia

Corresponding author

Julie Le Vot
julie.le-vot@u-bordeaux.fr

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1. Introduction

Gender norms play a central role in shaping persistent gender inequalities in labor market outcomes (Burda et al., 2007; Fernández et al., 2004; Fortin, 2005; Farré and Vella, 2013). A key mechanism through which these norms operate is the unequal allocation of childcare within households. Disparities in parental leave uptake, in particular, reinforce gender specialization and amplify gender gaps in wages, career progression, and labor supply (Schönberg and Ludsteck, 2007; Albrecht et al., 2015). These norms are reflected not only in parental behaviors but also in the design of family policies, contributing to substantial cross-country heterogeneity in parental leave systems (Kleven et al., 2025).

Policies respond to existing norms but may also shape them. A growing literature shows that parental leave policies can influence gender role attitudes. Strikingly, most of this evidence focuses on *paternity* leave: when paid and non-transferable ("daddy quotas"), such schemes tend to induce more egalitarian attitudes among men.[2] By contrast, much less is known about *maternity* leave policies, and mother's paid parental leave (PPL) in particular. While a large literature examines their labor market impacts (Rossin-Slater, 2018), evidence on how such policies may affect gender attitudes–and ultimately social norms–is rare and mixed.

Against this background, we examine the introduction of a government-funded PPL scheme in Australia in 2011, primarily targeted at mothers. We study its effect on women's gender role attitudes around childbirth. The program provides 18 weeks of paid leave for the primary caregiver, with income replacement set at the national minimum wage, a level that is relatively high by OECD standards. Australia provides a particularly informative setting, as it was one of the last rich countries to introduce a PPL scheme. This context provides a more radical policy change than those typically considered in the literature, which largely focuses on extensions of existing leave schemes, and may therefore be more likely to generate deeper changes in attitudes and behaviors.[3]

Estimating the effect of the reform on gender attitudes in levels is challenging: the natural control group, non-eligible women, is highly heterogeneous, including both high-income women and those with weak labor market attachment. Moreover, broader normative effects

[2] Improved attitudes are documented not only among fathers (Omidakhsh et al., 2020; Unterhofer and Wrohlich, 2017), but also among their children (Farré and González, 2022; Farré et al., 2023) and even non-treated peers (Kotsadam and Finseraas, 2011). These effects are generally attributed to increased paternal involvement in childcare and associated role-model mechanisms.

[3] Few studies examine the introduction of PPL rather than marginal reforms. In Norway, it improved maternal health and children's long-run outcomes (Carneiro et al., 2015; Bütikofer et al., 2021). In the UK, early maternity leave legislation affected maternal employment and job retention (Gregg et al., 2007). In California, the introduction of PPL increased leave-taking and employment attachment (Rossin-Slater et al., 2013; Baum and Ruhm, 2016). The Australian reform under study increased return-to-work rates and job continuity (Broadway et al., 2020).

of the reform may generate spillovers beyond eligible women. We therefore focus on changes in the *dynamics* of gender attitudes around childbirth, a period during which gender role perceptions are particularly malleable and often shift toward more traditional views (Kerry et al., 2022; Grinza, 2022). Our central hypothesis is that the introduction of PPL may have altered these attitudinal dynamics after childbirth, as the Australia scheme both legitimizes mothers' dual role as workers and caregivers and supports continued labor market attachment.

We use panel data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey to estimate fixed-effects models of gender role attitudes, examining whether the introduction of PPL has altered attitudinal changes, and mitigated the potential traditionalizing shift, around the postpartum period. We further conduct heterogeneous estimations to provide suggestive evidence on the underlying mechanisms. Finally, we assess the labor market implications, focusing on mothers' likelihood of returning to work after childbirth and their hours worked, in relation to changes in gender attitudes.

Results confirm that the institutional design of the Australian PPL scheme steered attitudinal changes associated with maternal leave toward more egalitarian views. We document a mild shift toward more traditional gender attitudes after birth prior to the reform, which is reversed following the introduction of PPL, leading to more egalitarian attitudes. These attitudinal changes are accompanied by consistent behavioral responses, as exposure to the reform is associated with a higher likelihood of returning to full-time employment after childbirth, in line with existing evidence (Broadway et al., 2020) and consistent with a reduced reinforcement of traditional gender specialization. Our findings are robust to a wide range of sensitivity analyses, alternative outcome measures, and model specifications.

This paper makes several contributions. *First*, by exploiting the timing of childbirth around a salient policy reform in Australia and using rich panel data, we provide evidence that paid maternity leave can reshape gender role attitudes around childbirth, i.e. at a critical life-course transition. While existing work has documented attitudinal changes in response to paternity leave reforms, evidence on the normative effects of maternity leave policies remains scarce.

Second, we provide heterogeneous analyses that are consistent with the legitimization and economic feasibility of women's roles as workers and mothers. By introducing paid maternity leave, the society formally recognizes this dual role, reducing stigma against maternal employment after childbirth and challenging the traditional norm that "a good mother stays at home". At the same time, the reform supports continued labor market attachment by allowing mothers to take a temporary, structured break from employment without severing ties to their job or employer.

Third, while the impact of PPL on women's labor market attachment has been extensively studied,[4] it has rarely been connected to attitudinal dynamics. We provide suggestive evidence that shifts toward more egalitarian views are associated with higher post-birth employment and hours worked. Overall, these results highlight how the design and framing of family policies can influence both gender role attitudes and economic outcomes.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 provides background on the institutional context and reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 presents the empirical approach and the data. Section 4 reports the main results on the effect of the PPL reform on gender attitudes, along with complementary analyses of labor market outcomes.

2. Background

2.1 Institutional Context

Before the PPL reform, parental leave was either unpaid or contingent upon employer provision, which maintained the perception that caregiving was primarily a private responsibility of mothers rather than a collective social obligation (Whitehouse et al., 2007). Working women were entitled to up to 12 months of unpaid and job-protected leave (1979 Maternity Leave Test Case decision, extended by the Fair Work Act 2009). Although some employers offered short periods of paid leave, access was limited, with only approximately 50% of mothers benefiting from such privately-funded provisions (Bassford et al., 2020).

The 2011 Paid Parental Leave (PPL) scheme provided eligible primary caregivers, typically mothers, with 18 weeks of government-funded leave, offering income replacement at the level of the minimum wage, subject to a minimum work requirement. To be eligible, the primary caregiver must have worked at least 330 hours over a minimum of 10 months within the 13 months preceding the birth. Additionally, their taxable income must be below $150,000 in the year before the birth, and they must be an Australian citizen or permanent resident.

Although the reform was introduced as a parental leave rather than a maternity leave, 99% of recipients were women in 2012 and 74% of the eligible mothers took PPL in 2021 (Baxter et al. 2023). This reform represented a significant shift in the conception of maternity leave, framing it as a social entitlement: the benefit was state-financed and justified on the grounds of

[4] A large literature examines the impact of PPL on maternal labor supply following childbirth. Early cross-country evidence suggests that access to PPL increases mothers' employment and job continuity, although long durations may entail adverse wage effects (Ruhm, 1998; Waldfogel et al., 1999; Berger and Waldfogel, 2004). More recent studies exploit quasi-experimental variation from policy reforms and typically find that PPL delays return to work in the short run while strengthening medium-term employment attachment (Rossin-Slater et al., 2013; Schönberg and Ludsteck, 2014; Lalive et al., 2014; Dahl et al., 2016; Baum and Ruhm, 2016; Kluve and Schmitz, 2018).

promoting child and maternal health, advancing gender equality, and supporting economic participation (Martin et al., 2014).

2.2 Gender Attitudes and Maternal Leave

General Literature. Evidence on how maternal leave policies affect attitudes is scarce and mixed. Cross-country analyses suggest that more generous maternity leave is associated with more egalitarian attitudes, particularly in dual-earner contexts (Sjöberg, 2004; Heymann et al., 2019), but contrasting evidence exists (Huang and Jia, 2025). Policy design appears to play a key role: short, well-paid, and gender-symmetric leave tends to support maternal employment and more egalitarian norms, whereas long, unpaid, mother-targeted leave schemes may reinforce the perception that childcare is primarily a maternal responsibility (Baker and Milligan, 2010; Olivetti and Petrongolo, 2017). More generally, the mechanisms through which policies affect gender attitudes are better understood for other types of family policies. For instance, expansions of public childcare provision have been shown to reduce traditional gender attitudes, particularly among women (Zoch and Schober, 2018; Ellingsæter et al., 2016).

Attitudinal Dynamics around Maternal Leave. Motherhood is a transformative life event that may reshape gender attitudes. Interdisciplinary evidence shows that childbirth and maternity leave often reinforce traditional gender norms (Kerry et al., 2022; Grinza, 2022), particularly among women (Baxter et al., 2014). These shifts reflect adaptation to post-birth labor market and caregiving arrangements, typically involving reduced employment and increased unpaid work. These patterns are consistent with theories of cognitive dissonance and identity adjustment (Kranton, 2016; Schober and Scott, 2012): women's attitudes shit to align with these new roles and constraints. In this sense, traditional norms are not only externally imposed but can also emerge endogenously as individuals reconcile beliefs with lived experiences.

Importantly, gender attitudes are also malleable in the opposite direction. For example, parenting daughters has been shown to *reduce* fathers' agreement with traditional gender divisions of labor (Borrell-Porta et al., 2018), illustrating that parenthood does not mechanically entrench traditional roles. Building on this insight, we argue that the introduction of PPL can redirect post-birth attitudinal dynamics away from traditionalism and toward more egalitarian gender role perceptions.

3. Empirical Approach and Data

3.1 Empirical Strategy

Our analysis focuses on women observed around childbirth, both before and after the implementation of Australia's PPL reform. In the baseline model, we exploit two sources of

variation: (i) the timing of childbirth, comparing pre- and post-birth periods for the same woman, and (ii) exposure to the reform, defined by whether the child was born before or after the 2011 policy introduction. Our model is based on a panel data framework with two time periods for each woman–child pair, corresponding to the pre- and post-birth periods. The main fixed-effect specification is the following:

$$Tradi_{ijt} = \alpha_i + \beta_1 Birth_{ijt} + \beta_2 Post_t + \beta_3 \left(Birth_{ijt} \times Post_t\right) + X'_{ijt}\beta_4 + \beta_5 t + \nu_{ijt} \quad (1)$$

where $Tradi_{ijt}$ denotes the traditional gender attitude index for mother i at time t around the birth of child j. $Birth_{ijt}$ is an indicator equal to one in the post-birth period, and $Post_t$ equals one for births occurring after 2011. Mother fixed effects α_i absorb time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity, while X_{ijt} includes time-varying controls such as household income, urban or rural areas, and women's educational attainment. The linear time trend t captures gradual secular changes in gender attitudes over the 2001–2019 period.

Two coefficients are of particular interest. The parameter β_1 captures the change in gender attitudes following childbirth in the pre-reform period, allowing us to check the presence of traditional shifts in Australia once individual fixed effects are accounted for. Next, our main coefficient of interest β_3 measures how the post-birth attitudinal shift differs for women who gave birth after the reform and were therefore exposed to the new PPL regime.

3.2 Data

Our analysis draws on data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) Survey, a nationally representative longitudinal household panel. We use Waves 1 through 19, covering the 2001–2019 period, and deliberately exclude later waves to avoid potential interference from the COVID-19 pandemic. In Wave 1, the survey included 19,914 individuals from 7,682 households. Our sample consists of women aged 18 to 50 who had at least one child during the observation period and for whom we observe gender role attitudes both before and after childbirth[5], as well as labor market status prior to birth. Births are identified using household roster information, which allows us to link newborns to their parents. This procedure yields a total of 2,576 births, of which 1,256 occurred before the 2011 reform and 1,320 occurred afterward, corresponding to 1,580 distinct mothers.

Regarding measures of gender role attitudes, we focus on items that capture perceptions of women's dual roles as workers and mothers. Attitudes are coded such that higher values

[5] Measures of gender role attitudes are collected in Waves 1, 5, 8, 11, 15, and 19. For each woman x birth, we use the attitudinal information observed closest in time before and after childbirth.

indicate more traditional views, on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree, reflecting egalitarian attitudes) to 7 (strongly agree, reflecting traditional attitudes). Specifically, we consider responses to the following statements: (i) it is better for everyone involved if the man earns the money and the woman takes care of the home and children ("breadwinner model"); (ii) mothers who do not really need the money should not work ("mothers: no need to work"); (iii) a working mother cannot establish just as good a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work for pay ("working mother: bad for child"); and (iv) whatever career a woman may have, her most important role in life is still that of being a mother ("woman's role is mother").

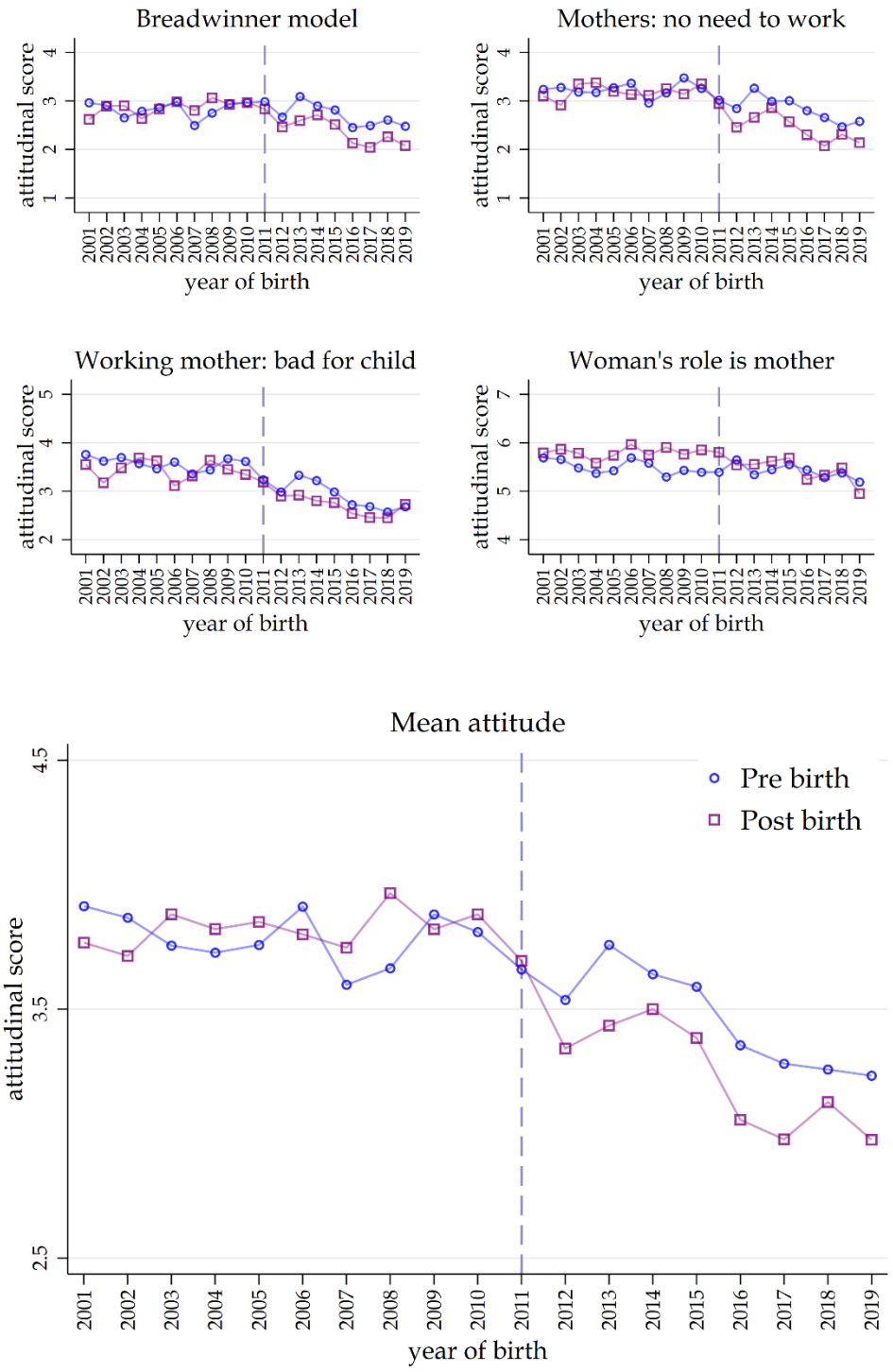
3.3 A First Look at the Data

Traditional Attitudes. In **Figure A1**, we report the distribution of each of the four individual attitudinal scores and their average. Women generally hold views supporting mother's labor force participation in three of the four measured attitudes. In contrast, most women declare motherhood as their primary role. This suggests that women value both labor force participation and motherhood, viewing them not as incompatible but as complementary aspects of their identity. The distribution of the composite attitude index is approximately bell-shaped, suggesting that while extreme positions are rare, meaningful variation in gender role attitudes remains in the population, which motivates the panel analysis of post-birth attitudinal change. Cross-sectional correlations reported in **Table A1** show that more traditional gender attitudes are, as expected, positively associated with lower education levels, living in rural areas, lower income, and larger families.

Evolution of Attitudinal Scores. In **Figure 1**, we plot average gender attitude scores before and after childbirth by year of birth of the child, with higher values indicating more traditional attitudes. Across cohorts, gender attitudes exhibit a relative flat trend before the introduction of Australia's PPL scheme (vertical dashed line). During this pre-reform period, post-birth attitudes are, if anything, slightly more traditional than pre-birth attitudes. After 2011, this pattern changes: post-birth attitudes become systematically less traditional relative to pre-birth attitudes, particularly for the composite index.

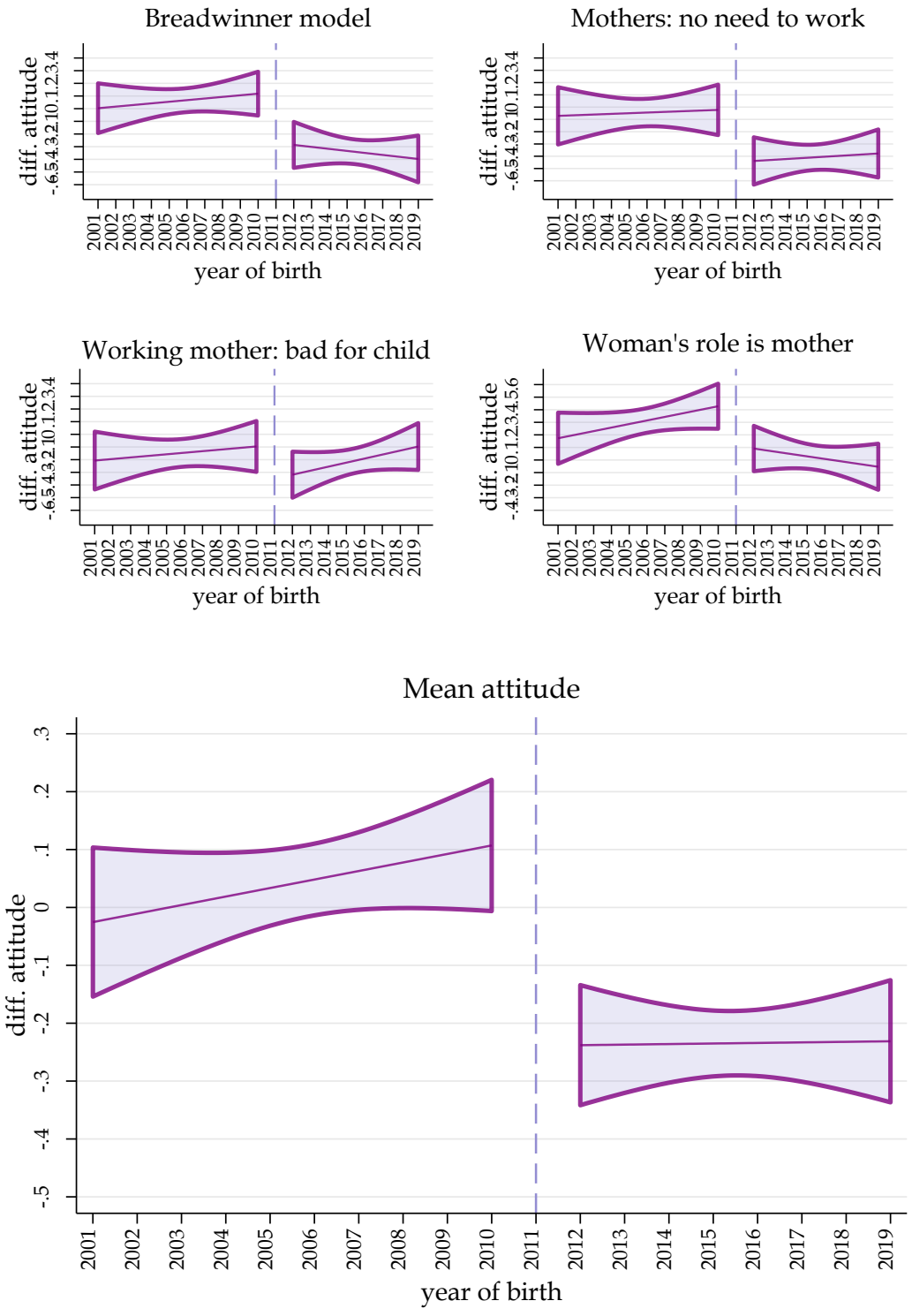
Figure 2 provides a complementary visualization of the identifying variation by plotting the post–pre birth difference in gender attitudes by birth cohort. In the pre-reform period, these differences are small and generally positive, consistent with a mild traditionalist shift following childbirth. After the reform, the post–pre birth difference becomes negative across most attitude items and for the composite index, indicating a reversal of the traditionalist shift.

Figure 1: Post- vs Pre-birth Attitudes by Birth Year



Notes: The figure plots pre- and post childbirth mean gender attitude scores by year of childbirth. Attitudinal measures are coded on a 1–7 scale where higher values indicate more traditional gender views. They are collected in waves 1, 5, 8, 11, 15, and 19 of the HILDA survey (for each woman–birth observation, we use attitudinal information closest in time before and after childbirth). When multiple births occur within the same survey interval for a same woman, we keep a single pre- and post-birth attitude observation and record the total number of births within that period (this information is used as control in estimations thereafter). Vertical dashed line marks the introduction of the PPL scheme.

Figure 2: Post- vs Pre-birth Differential Attitudes by Birth Year



Notes: The figure plots the difference between post-birth and pre-birth gender attitude scores by year of birth of the child, using one observation per woman–birth. Higher values indicate a shift toward more traditional attitudes following childbirth. Measures of gender role attitudes are collected in waves 1, 5, 8, 11, 15, and 19 of the HILDA Survey (for each woman–birth, we use the attitudinal observation closest in time before and after childbirth). Vertical dashed line marks the introduction of the PPL scheme.

Although purely descriptive, these patterns are consistent with our core hypothesis: the introduction of PPL altered the post-birth evolution of gender attitudes, mitigating—and in some cases reversing—the traditionalist shift in gender attitudes typically observed after childbirth. We now turn to econometric analyses to assess whether these patterns hold once we account for individual fixed effects.

4. Results

4.1 Women's Gender Attitudes: Main Results

We estimate the main model using the mean gender attitude score as outcome. **Table 1** reports estimates of the effect of childbirth and exposure to the PPL reform on this composite index. The first specification is the baseline model with mothers' fixed effects, the second incorporates socio-demographic control variables, and the third additionally accounts for multiple births occurring within the same time interval.

Table 1: Mean Attitude Estimation

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Birth	0.0977***	0.0952***	0.0988***
	(0.0363)	(0.0359)	(0.0359)
Post-reform	-0.174**	-0.178**	-0.176**
	(0.0762)	(0.0763)	(0.0763)
Birth x Post-reform	**-0.179*** **	**-0.182*** **	**-0.181*** **
	(0.0551)	**(0.0552)**	**(0.0552)**
Year	-0.0145	-0.00821	-0.00937
	(0.00994)	(0.0103)	(0.0102)
# obs.	4,364	4,364	4,364
R2	0.761	0.762	0.762
Post-reform change in childbirth effect relative to pre-reform pre-birth mean attitude:			
	-4.7%	-4.8%	-4.8%
Mother Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES
Socio-demogr. controls	NO	YES	YES
Control for multiple births	NO	NO	YES

Notes: estimations of gender attitudes at mother x child x year level on a set of determinants including child birth dummy ("birth", capturing the pre-reform childbirth effect), post-2011 reform dummy ("post-reform"), their interaction (the treatment, capturing the change in childbirth effect following the PPL reform), linear time trend, and depending on the specification: mother fixed effects, socio-demographic controls (education, income, urban), and controls for multiple births between two years of observation (when multiple births occur within the same survey interval for a same woman, we keep a single pre- and post-birth attitude observation and record the total number of births within that period). The mean attitude score is computed from four gender attitude measures defined in the main text: breadwinner model, mothers: no need to work, working mother: bad for child, woman's role is mother (each attitude is coded on a 1-7 scale, such that higher values indicate more traditional views). Standard errors are clustered at mother level and reported in parentheses. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

In the pre-reform period, childbirth is associated with a small but statistically significant increase in traditional gender attitudes, consistent with a traditionalist shift following birth. The estimated change of about 0.10 points on the 1–7 scale corresponds to a 2.6% increase relative to the pre-reform, pre-birth mean attitude and roughly 8% of a standard deviation. This is more than offset by the coefficient on the interaction between childbirth and the post-reform period: the latter is negative, large and highly significant across all specifications, indicating that the post-birth shift is substantially attenuated following the introduction of PPL. In magnitude, the childbirth effect declines by approximately 0.18 points after the reform, equivalent to a 5% reduction relative to the pre-reform pre-birth mean, so that the net post-reform effect of childbirth on attitudes becomes negative (around −0.08 points, i.e. a decline of 2.2% relative to pre-reform pre-birth attitude). These results are robust to the inclusion of socio-demographic controls and to accounting for multiple births per mother.

4.2 Sensitivity Analysis and Heterogeneity

Alternative Outcomes

We then examine heterogeneity across the different attitudinal measures. **Table A2** indicates that the reform-induced change in post-birth gender attitudes is present for three out of four measures, namely the male-breadwinner model, mothers' labor supply, and the view that a woman's primary role is motherhood. By contrast, no significant change is detected for beliefs about whether maternal employment is harmful for children. This distinction is consistent with the interpretation that the reform primarily affected normative views about gender roles and maternal identity, while beliefs about child development, such as concerns about the quality of mother–child relationships, may be more persistent and less responsive to short-run policy changes. **Table A3** reports results using a principal component analysis (PCA)–based gender attitude index. The estimates closely match the baseline results: the interaction between childbirth and the post-reform period remains negative and highly significant across specifications, with a magnitude very similar to that obtained using the mean attitude index.

Heterogeneity: Eligibility

We extend our baseline analysis by allowing the post-birth evolution of gender attitudes to vary by eligibility for PPL. Although exploiting variation in eligibility is not required for identification, it provides useful insight into whether the reform primarily affected eligible mothers or also influenced broader norms through contextual channels such as public debate or information diffusion.

Table 2: Mean Attitude Estimation, Heterogeneity by Eligibility Status

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Birth x Eligible	0.111**	0.106**	0.108**
	(0.0446)	(0.0444)	(0.0444)
Birth x Not Eligible	0.0954	0.0911	0.0941
	(0.0759)	(0.0757)	(0.0756)
Post-reform x Eligible	-0.140*	-0.148*	-0.145*
	(0.0824)	(0.0828)	(0.0827)
Post-reform x Not Eligible	-0.264*	-0.266*	-0.269*
	(0.145)	(0.146)	(0.146)
Eligible	-0.144	-0.134	-0.134
	(0.151)	(0.152)	(0.151)
Birth x Post-reform x Eligible	**-0.177*** **	**-0.181*** **	**-0.180*** **
	(0.0648)	**(0.0649)**	**(0.0649)**
Birth x Post-reform x Not Eligible	-0.117	-0.119	-0.118
	(0.130)	(0.129)	(0.129)
Year	-0.0195*	-0.0127	-0.0135
	(0.0101)	(0.0106)	(0.0105)
# obs.	4,362	4,362	4,362
R2	0.761	0.762	0.762
Test equality triple interaction (p-values)	0.68	0.67	0.67
Mother Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES
Socio-demogr. controls	NO	YES	YES
Control for multiple birth	NO	NO	YES

Notes: estimations of gender attitudes at mother x child x year level on a set of determinants including eligibility to PPL, child birth dummy ("birth", capturing the pre-reform childbirth effect), post-2011 reform dummy ("post-reform"), birth x reform (heterogeneous treatment, capturing the change in childbirth effect following the PPL reform) - all those interacted with eligibility - plus linear trend and as specified: mothers' fixed effects, socio-demographic controls (education, income, urban), control for multiple births between two years of observation. Standard errors are clustered at mother level, reported in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1.

Results are reported in **Table 2**. As before, childbirth is associated with a modest increase in traditional attitudes in the pre-reform period. Following the reform, a reversal is observed for both eligible and non-eligible mothers, though it is smaller and statistically insignificant for the latter group. While the difference between the two groups is not statistically significant, the contrast remains informative. It suggests that normative effects may operate primarily through direct exposure to the PPL scheme, while broader contextual influences and spillovers cannot be ruled out.[6]

[6] Eligibility-based differences should be interpreted as suggestive, as eligibility for PPL depends on household characteristics that are themselves correlated with gender attitudes. Moreover, introducing additional treated–untreated variation for a proper triple-difference design would require exploiting actual leave take-up rather than eligibility, particularly since around one in four eligible mothers did not take up PPL. However, take-up is imperfectly measured in HILDA and is likely endogenous to unobserved parental characteristics.

Further Heterogeneity

We provide further pre-birth heterogeneity analyses in **Table A4**. We first focus on pre-birth *employment status* (column 1), which captures several reinforcing dimensions. Although point estimates are of similar magnitude across groups, statistically significant effects are concentrated among women who worked full-time prior to childbirth. This pattern aligns with the previous results, as eligibility largely depends on pre-birth labor market activity. Employed women also tend to hold less traditional attitudes ex ante, leaving greater scope for childbirth-related traditionalist shifts and their attenuation by the reform. The finding is also consistent with their stronger labor market attachment (Fortin, 2005), as women with stable employment are likely to be more responsive to a policy that formally recognizes and supports their dual role as workers and mothers.

We then stratify the sample by *pre-birth gender attitudes* (column 2), using attitudes recorded in the first survey wave surrounding childbirth. This allows us to examine whether the reform-induced change in post-birth attitudinal dynamics is more pronounced among women with greater scope for attitudinal shifts.[7] We find that the largest shift toward traditionalism following childbirth occurs among women who held more egalitarian views prior to birth—likely because the transition to motherhood generates a sharper mismatch between their prior beliefs and their new caregiving roles. Consistently, it is also among these women that the reform's reversing effect is strongest.

Finally, we examine whether the effect varies by *pre-birth household income*. Interpretation is challenging because income is correlated with pre-birth gender attitudes, eligibility, and women's labor market attachment. To address this, we study income heterogeneity within eligibility groups, simply distinguishing between below- and above-median income households among eligible and non-eligible mothers. On the one hand, we find some effects among non-eligible women close to the eligibility threshold, i.e. in lower-income households within this group, suggesting the presence of contextual or spillover effects. On the other hand, low-income eligible women may combine some degree of labor market attachment—which may play a positive role, as suggested above—with a stronger appreciation of the income protection provided by the reform. Both elements create greater scope for norm updating, while direct exposure to the policy implies higher treatment intensity. This interpretation is also consistent with labor supply responses documented by Broadway et al. (2020), who find that the strongest effects of the reform occur among lower-income mothers and suggest that it

[7] Because pre-birth attitudes are measured with error and may be subject to mean reversion, we implement a first step aimed at reducing their correlation with observed characteristics by regressing pre-birth attitudes on controls and constructing attitudinal quartiles based on the resulting residuals.

primarily operated by relaxing financial constraints and strengthening labor market attachment. We focus on labor market behavior, and their link to attitudinal changes, in the next section.

Estimations for men

While Australia's PPL scheme was primarily designed for—and taken up by—women, men who became fathers after 2011 may also have been affected, either through their partners' uptake of PPL or through exposure to the scheme's broader communication and normative framing. We therefore estimate the main model using fathers' gender attitudes as the outcome variable. The results reported in **Table A5** point to reform effects that are qualitatively similar but weaker than those observed for women. As for mothers, childbirth is associated with a post-birth shift toward more traditional attitudes while the introduction of PPL partially offsets it, though to a smaller extent. These results suggest that the reform may have affected gender attitudes beyond mothers themselves, potentially through within-household dynamics, changes in expectations around caregiving, or broader normative signals.

4.3 Labor Market Outcomes

Mechanisms and the Employment-Attitudes Link

The attitudinal changes documented above point to a set of mechanisms through which the PPL reform may operate. By formally recognizing maternity leave as a social right and providing income support during the post-birth period, the scheme is designed to legitimize women's dual role as workers and mothers and improve the economic feasibility of maintaining labor market attachment. This combination is likely to reduce stigma associated with returning to work after childbirth and to strengthen women's connection to the labor market.

Qualitative evidence supports this interpretation: interviews conducted after the reform indicate that the PPL scheme explicitly recognizes and values women's caregiving work (Martin et al., 2014). Mothers reported that, because payments were made on a regular, fortnightly basis, the leave felt more like a wage for childcare. The policy also facilitated a smoother transition back to employment, notably through the "Keeping in Touch" provisions and the administration of payments through employers, both of which reinforced mothers' attachment to their pre-birth workplaces.

To go out step further, we examine labor market outcomes following childbirth and how they are affected by the reform. We collapse the longitudinal data to obtain one observation per woman–child pair, with information on labor market outcomes before and after birth.

Focusing on women who were employed prior to childbirth, we estimate the probability of being employed in the survey wave following birth or, alternatively, the number of hours worked upon return to work, exploiting variation in exposure to the PPL regime. This analysis allows us to document whether the introduction of PPL reduced post-birth labor market withdrawal and whether the observed behavioral patterns are consistent with the observed shift toward more egalitarian gender attitudes.

Change in Labor Market Behavior

Table 3 reports estimates of women's *employment probability* in the survey wave following childbirth, conditional on being employed prior to birth. Column (1) shows that women holding more egalitarian gender attitudes ("egalitarian," defined as below the average traditionalism score) are significantly more likely to be employed after childbirth. In addition, the post-reform indicator is positive and significant, indicating that the introduction of PPL is associated with a higher probability of returning to work in the year following birth (a result consistent with Broadway et al., 2020). Column (2) further documents the co-movement of labor market behavior and attitudinal change. The positive association between reform exposure and employment is strongly concentrated among women who experienced a large decrease in traditional gender attitudes following childbirth. For this group, exposure to the reform is associated with a significant increase of about 8 percentage points in post-birth employment rate, whereas the association is negligible for women whose attitudes changed little. The difference between these two estimates is statistically significant.

The descriptive patterns are broadly confirmed when examining *hours worked* among employed women. As shown in column (1′), women with more egalitarian gender attitudes work significantly more hours (+2 hours/week) after childbirth, and the post-reform period is associated with an increase in hours (+1.5 hours). This suggests that reform exposure is associated not only with a higher likelihood of returning to work but also with greater intensity of post-birth labor market participation, consistent with stronger attachment rather than marginal re-entry. Column (2′) further shows that increases in hours worked are larger for women who experienced a larger decline in traditional gender attitudes following childbirth, although the difference relative to women with smaller attitudinal changes is not statistically significant.

Overall, these results suggest that the PPL reform is associated with stronger labor market attachment, a pattern that aligns with the observed shift toward more egalitarian gender attitudes. Since both outcomes are jointly determined by the reform, we cannot establish a causal chain from attitudinal change to employment or vice versa. Nonetheless, the fact that women who experienced the largest post-birth shift toward more egalitarian views are also

those most likely to remain employed and to work more hours is consistent with a common underlying mechanism in which the reform both legitimizes maternal employment and relaxes financial constraints on continued labor market participation.

Table 3: Estimation of Labor Market Outcomes in Waves following Childbirth

Labor market outcomes during post-birth wave	Employed		Work hours (among employed)	
	(1)	(2)	(1')	(2')
Egalitarian	0.0855***	0.0914***	2.100***	2.176***
	(0.0199)	(0.0200)	(0.661)	(0.667)
Post-reform	0.0516**		1.526**	
	(0.0205)		(0.695)	
Post-reform x Large decrease in trad. attitude		**0.0833*** **		**1.905** **
		(0.0241)		**(0.848)**
Post-reform x Small change		**0.0240**		**1.179**
		(0.0241)		**(0.784)**
test: Large = small change (p-value)		0.0200		0.393
# obs.	1,999	1,999	1,500	1,500
R2	0.049	0.051	0.029	0.029
Socio-demogr. controls	YES	YES	YES	YES

Notes: estimations of women's employment outcome just after child birth on a set of determinants including socio-demographic controls (woman's age and education, household income, urban, citizenship), attitude dummy (egalitarian : average 'traditionalistic' attitude below the mean) and (1)/(1'): reform dummy, (2)/(2'): reform dummy interacted with large decline in gender (traditional) attitude or with small change in this measure over the child birth period. Robust standard errors reported in parentheses. Significance levels: *** p < 0.01, ** p < 0.05, * p < 0.1.

5. Conclusion

This paper examines the impact of the introduction of a public paid parental leave scheme on gender role attitudes among mothers (and fathers) following childbirth. We leverage two sources of variation: childbirth itself and the 2011 Paid Parental Leave Reform in Australia, which introduced a paid parental leave of 18 weeks at the national level. Using longitudinal data and within-individual variation around birth, we document how a major family policy reform can shape not only labor market behavior but also the evolution of gender role attitudes at a critical life-course juncture.

We show that mothers exposed to the reform experience a shift toward more egalitarian gender attitudes, mitigating—and in some cases reversing—the traditionalist shift typically associated with childbirth. While smaller in magnitude, a similar attenuation is also observed among fathers, suggesting that the reform may have affected gender attitudes beyond mothers themselves through indirect or contextual channels.

Our findings are consistent with the key mechanisms through which the reform operates. When maternity leave is formally recognized and financially compensated as a service to

society, it may reduce the cognitive dissonance that otherwise pushes women toward more traditional attitudes following childbirth. The reform effectively reframed caregiving from a private obligation to a publicly supported right, generating legitimization and social signaling effects that altered how women perceive their roles and labor market entitlements.

Consistent with this interpretation, we show that women exposed to the reform are more likely to return to work in the survey wave following childbirth, a behavioral response closely associated with the shift toward more egalitarian gender attitudes. These results highlight the potential for family policies to shape gender attitudes, not only by altering incentives and constraints but also by changing the social meaning of motherhood and paid work.

Several limitations of this study suggest directions for future research. *First*, while our empirical strategy identifies reform-induced changes in gender attitudes around childbirth, it does not fully disentangle the roles of direct policy exposure, within-household dynamics, and broader spillovers. Future work using detailed data on leave take-up or variation in policy salience could better isolate these mechanisms. *Second*, our analysis focuses on short- to medium-run attitudinal changes around childbirth. Whether these persist over time, translate into sustained behavioral responses, or affect outcomes such as fertility, careers, and intra-household bargaining remains an open question. *Finally*, although the Australian setting may raise external validity concerns, it provides a clean case of a sharp transition from unpaid to publicly funded leave. As such, it offers useful insights for countries expanding maternity leave. Studying similar reforms in other contexts, or comparing maternity- and paternity-focused policies, would help assess the generalizability of our findings.

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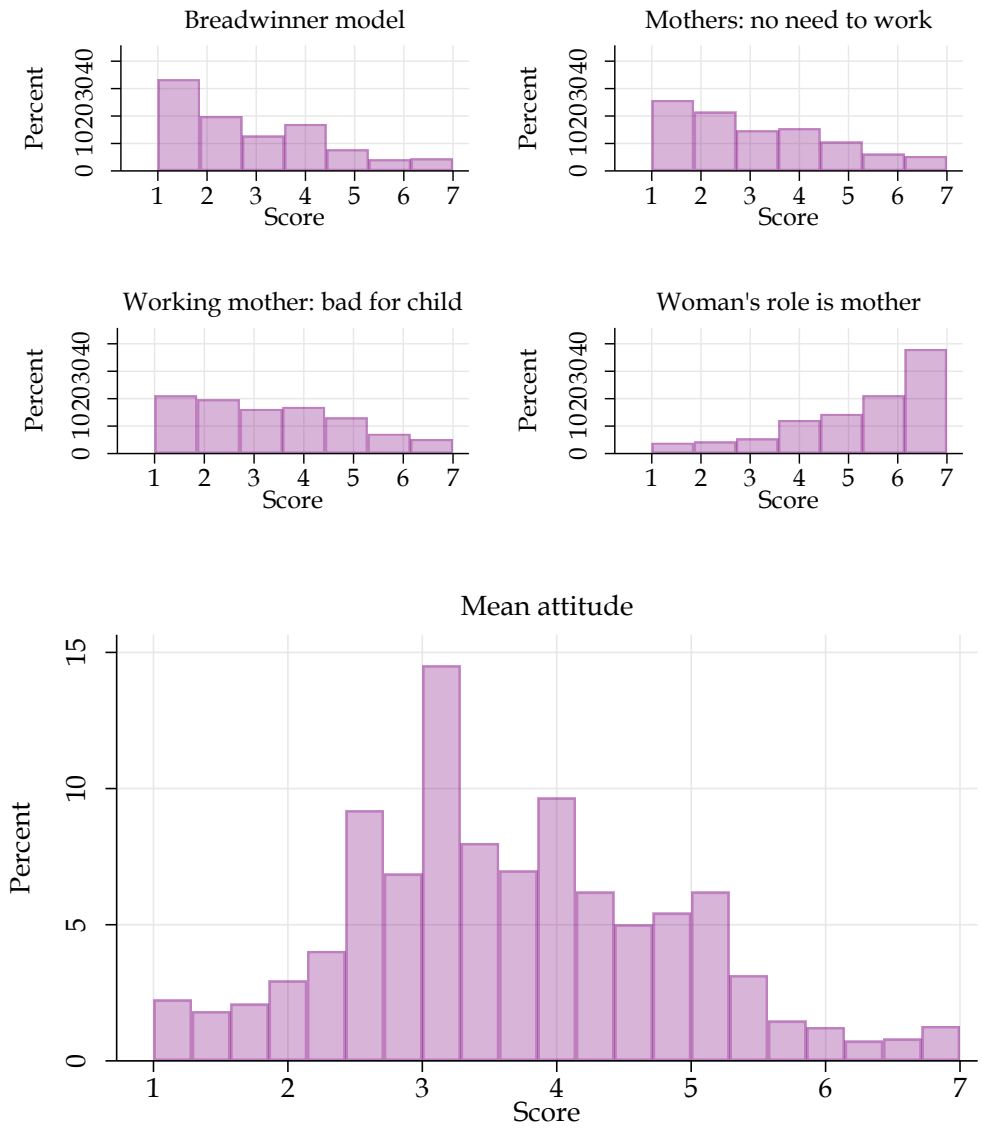
Appendix

Figure A1: Distribution of Pre-birth Attitudes



Source: HILDA (gender role attitudes are collected in Waves 1, 5, 8, 11, 15, and 19) and authors' calculations. Notes: Attitudes are coded such that higher values indicate more traditional views, on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree, reflecting egalitarian attitudes) to 7 (strongly agree, reflecting traditional attitudes). We consider responses to the following statements: (i) it is better for everyone involved if the man earns the money and the woman takes care of the home and children ("breadwinner model"); (ii) mothers who do not really need the money should not work ("mothers: no need to work"); (iii) a working mother cannot establish just as good a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work for pay ("working mother: bad for child"); and (iv) whatever career a woman may have, her most important role in life is still that of being a mother ("woman's role is mother"). The main outcome is the average score computed from the four attitude measures.

Table A1: Descriptive Estimation of Mean Attitude

	(1)	(2)
Low educ.	0.315***	0.313***
	(0.0713)	(0.0714)
Urban	-0.109*	-0.109*
	(0.0620)	(0.0621)
Household income	-0.0319***	-0.0319***
	(0.00620)	(0.00618)
# of children	0.137***	
	(0.0245)	
Birth order: 2		0.140***
		(0.0391)
Birth order: 3		0.254***
		(0.0622)
Birth order: 4		0.479***
		(0.108)
Year	-0.0297***	-0.0297***
	(0.00460)	(0.00459)
# obs.	4,362	4,362
R2	0.083	0.084

Notes: Estimations of gender attitudes at mother x child x year level on a set of determinants including socio-demographic controls (education, income, urban vs rural), number of children or child birth order, and linear time trend. The mean attitude score is computed from four gender attitude measures defined in the main text: breadwinner model, mothers: no need to work, working mother: bad for child, woman's role is mother (each attitude is coded on a 1-7 scale, such that higher values indicate more traditional views). Standard errors are clustered at mother level and reported in parentheses. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table A2: Estimations with Alternative Attitudes

	Breadwinner model	Mothers: no need to work	Working mother: bad for child	Woman's role is mother
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Birth	0.103*	0.0388	-0.0155	0.254***
	(0.0565)	(0.0651)	(0.0635)	(0.0596)
Post-reform	-0.211	-0.273**	-0.347***	0.118
	(0.130)	(0.137)	(0.133)	(0.126)
Birth x Post-reform	**-0.286*** **	**-0.243** **	**0.0865**	**-0.285*** **
	(0.0928)	**(0.104)**	**(0.0979)**	**(0.0932)**
Year	-0.00385	-0.00980	-0.0324*	0.0132
	(0.0150)	(0.0176)	(0.0176)	(0.0158)
# obs.	4,364	4,364	4,364	4,364
R2	0.705	0.666	0.670	0.673
Post-reform change in childbirth effect relative to pre-reform pre-birth mean attitude:				
	-9.9%	-7.6%	2.5%	-5.1%
Mother Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES	YES
Socio-demogr. controls	YES	YES	YES	YES
Control for multiple births	YES	YES	YES	YES

Notes: estimations of gender attitudes at mother x child x year level on a set of determinants including child birth dummy ("birth", capturing the pre-reform childbirth effect), post-2011 reform dummy ("post-reform"), their interaction (the treatment, capturing the change in childbirth effect following the PPL reform), linear time trend, mother fixed effects, socio-demographic controls (education, income, urban), and controls for multiple births between two years of observation. Attitude measures are defined in the main text: breadwinner model, mothers: no need to work, working mother: bad for child, woman's role is mother (each attitude is coded on a 1-7 scale, such that higher values indicate more traditional views). Standard errors are clustered at mother level and reported in parentheses. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table A3: Principal Component Analysis (PCA) Attitude Estimation

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Birth	0.0954**	0.0925**	0.0965**
	(0.0419)	(0.0414)	(0.0413)
Post-reform	-0.221**	-0.227**	-0.225**
	(0.0880)	(0.0882)	(0.0881)
Birth x Post-reform	**-0.201*** **	**-0.205*** **	**-0.204*** **
	(0.0635)	**(0.0637)**	**(0.0637)**
Year	-0.0180	-0.0104	-0.0117
	(0.0114)	(0.0119)	(0.0118)
# obs.	4,362	4,362	4,362
R2	0.761	0.762	0.762
Post-reform change in childbirth effect relative to pre-reform pre-birth mean attitude:			
	-5.3%	-5.4%	-5.4%
Mother Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES
Socio-demogr. controls	NO	YES	YES
Control for multiple births	NO	NO	YES

Notes: estimations of gender attitudes at mother x child x year level on a set of determinants including child birth dummy ("birth", capturing the pre-reform childbirth effect), post-2011 reform dummy ("post-reform"), their interaction (the treatment, capturing the change in childbirth effect following the PPL reform), linear time trend, and depending on the specification: mother fixed effects, socio-demographic controls (education, income, urban), and controls for multiple births between two years of observation (when multiple births occur within the same survey interval for a same woman, we keep a single pre- and post-birth attitude observation and record the total number of births within that period). The attitude score is the outcome of a PCA on four gender attitude measures defined in the main text: breadwinner model, mothers: no need to work, working mother: bad for child, woman's role is mother (each attitude is coded on a 1-7 scale, such that higher values indicate more traditional views). Standard errors are clustered at mother level and reported in parentheses. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table A4: Additional Heterogenous Effects

			Heterogeneity in women's pre-birth:			
	employment status		traditional attitude (quartiles)		income level among eligible vs noneligible households	
	(1)		(2)		(3)	
Birth	x Full time	**0.116** **(0.0592)**	x q1 (most egal.)	**0.360*** **(0.0732)**	x low-inc., non-eligible	**0.247**** **(0.113)**
	x Part time	0.260 (0.251)	x q2	**0.146**** **(0.0646)**	x high-inc., non-eligible	0.119 (0.111)
	x Not working	0.141* (0.0825)	x q3	0.00393 (0.0624)	x low-inc., eligible	0.0473 (0.0665)
			x q4 (most tradi.)	-0.187*** (0.0687)	x high-inc, eligible	0.0571 (0.0700)
Birth x Post-reform	x Full time	**-0.179**** **(0.0741)**	x q1 (most egal.)	**-0.521*** **(0.100)**	x low-inc., non-eligible	**-0.285*** **(0.165)**
	x Part time	-0.176 (0.249)	x q2	**-0.210**** **(0.0947)**	x high-inc., non-eligible	-0.101 (0.162)
	x Not working	-0.184 (0.129)	x q3	-0.164 (0.106)	x low-inc., eligible	**-0.225**** **(0.0904)**
			x q4 (most tradi.)	0.149 (0.129)	x high-inc, eligible	-0.108 (0.0876)
Mother Fixed Effects	YES		YES		YES	
Socio-demogr. controls	YES		YES		YES	
Multiple births	YES		YES		YES	

Notes: we report heterogeneous coefficients of the Birth and Birth x Post-reform coefficients from estimations of mean gender attitudes that control for post-2011 reform dummy, mothers' fixed effects, socio-demographic controls (education, income, urban), control for multiple births between two years of observation. For heterogeneity, high and low income levels are defined as above and below the median within each group (eligible vs non-eligible households). Standard errors are clustered at mother level, reported in parentheses. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

Table A5: Men's Mean Attitude Estimation

	(1)	(2)	(3)
Birth	0.105**	0.106**	0.107**
	(0.0426)	(0.0424)	(0.0427)
Post-reform	0.0409	0.0429	0.0430
	(0.0884)	(0.0883)	(0.0883)
Birth x Post-reform	**-0.127***	**-0.128***	**-0.128***
	(0.0652)	**(0.0652)**	**(0.0652)**
Year	-0.0292***	-0.0304***	-0.0306***
	(0.0103)	(0.0106)	(0.0106)
# obs.	3,432	3,432	3,432
R2	0.754	0.754	0.754
Father Fixed Effects	YES	YES	YES
Socio-demogr. controls	NO	YES	YES
Control for multiple birth	NO	NO	YES

Notes: estimations of gender attitudes at father x child x year level on a set of determinants including child birth dummy, post-2011 reform dummy, interaction (treatment), linear trend, and as specified: fathers' fixed effects, socio-demographic controls (education, income, urban), and control for multiple births between two years of observation. Standard errors are clustered at father level, reported in parentheses. Significance levels: *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.