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## Are Gender Norms Shaped by Who Earns More?

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# Are Gender Norms Shaped by Who Earns More?\*

## Abstract

Gender norms about parental labor supply are central to explaining persistent gender inequalities in the labor market, yet their causal determinants remain poorly understood. We examine whether people's gender attitudes are driven by mothers' and fathers' earnings, which may shape views about the efficient allocation of paid work and care. In a large-scale representative vignette experiment in Germany ( $N > 10,000$ ), we randomly vary pre-childbirth earnings and measure whether respondents recommend that the mother (father) stay home with the child while the father (mother) works full-time. Without specifying earnings, 90% recommend that the mother stay home. This share remains high when we specify that the mother earns less (93%). When she earns more, the share drops sharply to 47%, yet nearly half of respondents still recommend that the mother stay home. This asymmetric response rejects a purely income-based explanation of gender norms. Thus, economic circumstances shape gender attitudes, but deeply rooted norms persist even when they conflict with financial incentives.

## JEL classification

C90, D13, J16, J22

## Keywords

gender norms, labor supply, gender, survey experiment

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# 1 Introduction

Gender norms play a critical role in explaining differences in labor-market outcomes between men and women (Andresen & Nix, 2022; Bursztyn et al., 2017; Cortés & Pan, 2023; Fernandez et al., 2004). Norms surrounding maternal labor supply are especially relevant, as labor-market differences arising with the arrival of children contribute substantially to the remaining gender inequality in many countries (Cortés & Pan, 2023; Kleven & Landais, 2017; Kleven et al., 2025). In fact, Kleven (2022) and Kleven, Landais, Posch, et al. (2019) show that there is a strong positive cross-country correlation between the conservativeness of gender norms and labor-market disadvantages for women in general, and for mothers in particular. Past research has shown that this correlation is partly due to a causal effect of (perceived) gender norms on labor-market expectations, behavior, and outcomes (Bursztyn et al., 2020; Grewenig et al., 2026; Hermes et al., 2024).

However, the direction of causality may also run the other way. Traditional norms may persist *because* individuals observe gendered earnings gaps and incorporate them into their gender attitudes. While much research has focused on how gender norms influence women’s labor-market outcomes, far less is known about how labor-market circumstances shape gender norms. We investigate this reverse channel experimentally.

We argue that conservative gender norms may partly arise from labor-market realities in which women face earnings disadvantages. As Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) and Cialdini and Trost (1998) highlight, norms can reflect “best-practice considerations,” offering heuristics for achieving desired outcomes, such as maximizing household income. Applied to parental labor supply, this logic implies that if mothers earn less than fathers, the norm would favor fathers working while mothers stay home to care for children. If mothers earn more, however, the norm should shift toward fathers staying home. We test the extent to which such economic considerations shape gender-specific attitudes.<sup>1</sup>

We conduct a representative, pre-registered vignette experiment ( $N > 10,000$ ) in Germany to examine how gender differences in earnings affect attitudes toward maternal labor supply.

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<sup>1</sup>We follow Bursztyn et al. (2023) and refer to an individual’s own normative view as “attitudes,” while a “norm” describes the average of attitudes across individuals.

Germany represents an ideal setting for our study, as gender norms regarding maternal labor supply are comparatively conservative and child-related earnings disparities are large (Glogowsky et al., 2024; Kleven, Landais, Posch, et al., 2019). Specifically, we analyze how the pre-childbirth within-couple earnings gap influences respondents’ support for the conservative norm that the mother should stay home with the child while the father works full-time. Establishing a causal link between within-couple earnings gaps and gender norms using observational data is difficult, as exogenous variation in parental earnings combined with detailed measures of gender attitudes is usually not available. Our vignette experiment overcomes this identification challenge by introducing exogenous variation in within-couple earnings and directly measuring respondents’ gender-specific attitudes.<sup>2</sup>

The vignette presents a full-time working couple expecting their first child and planning for one parent to stay home with the child while the other returns to full-time work. We randomly assign respondents to one of five experimental groups. In the baseline scenario (*No specification*), we do not specify pre-childbirth earnings. In three treatment scenarios, we vary the within-couple earnings differential. In the *Mother earns less* scenario, the mother-to-be earns 1,400 Euros net per month, while the father-to-be earns 1,800 Euros. In the *Equal split* scenario, both parents earn 1,600 Euros. In the *Mother earns more* scenario, the mother-to-be earns 1,800 Euros, while the father-to-be earns 1,400 Euros.<sup>3</sup> In an additional robustness treatment (*Both parents 8 weeks*), we do not specify earnings but state that both parents stay home during the statutory maternity leave period (the first eight weeks after childbirth). The main outcome is respondents’ recommendation that the mother (or father) should stay home to provide care while the father (or mother) works full-time.<sup>4</sup>

If individuals fully follow “best-practice considerations,” we would expect a symmetric shift — from recommending that mothers stay home in the *Mother earns less* treatment to recommending that fathers stay home in the *Mother earns more* treatment compared to the *Equal split*

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<sup>2</sup>Hypothetical vignette experiments like ours are widely used in economics. For example, using hypothetical scenarios, Lane et al. (2023) examine the causal effect of laws on social norms, Andre et al. (2022) study people’s subjective models of the macroeconomy, and Delavande and Zafar (2019) investigate the determinants of students’ university choices.

<sup>3</sup>Total household income in all vignettes is 3,200 Euros, reflecting the median household income in Germany in 2020 (Destatis, 2020).

<sup>4</sup>Consistent with our approach, the empirical literature typically measures (gender) norms using unincentivized survey questions that elicit agreement with such statements (e.g., Aloud et al. (2020), Bursztyn et al. (2020), and Cortés et al. (2024)).

treatment. In this case, the gender norm would be entirely driven by earnings differentials. By contrast, if individuals do not follow “best-practice considerations” at all, we would expect no change in recommendations as we move from the *Mother earns less* to the *Mother earns more* treatment, implying that gender norms are independent of within-couple earnings differences. The empirical question of this paper is therefore to what extent mothers’ and fathers’ earnings shape gender attitudes, and whether social norms persist even when they run counter to economic incentives.

We report three main results. First, gender attitudes are highly conservative. In the *No specification* scenario, where parental earnings are not stated, 90% of respondents recommend that the mother stay home while the father returns to full-time work. Explicitly stating that the father earns more than the mother in the *Mother earns less* scenario yields a very similar support rate of 93% ( $p < 0.01$ ). Importantly, even in the *Equal split* scenario, a majority of 89% ( $p = 0.23$ ) still recommend that the mother stay home and the father work full-time.

Second, attitudes respond to earnings differentials favoring women. In the *Mother earns more* scenario, support for the conservative gender norm drops sharply by 43 percentage points, to 47% ( $p < 0.01$ ). However, this decline is far from symmetric. If gender norms were entirely driven by earnings differences, support for the conservative norm would fall to around 7%, mirroring the *Mother earns less* scenario. Instead, nearly half of respondents continue to state that the mother should stay home, despite the associated loss in household income. This pattern rejects a purely income-based explanation of the gender norm.

Third, our heterogeneity analysis reveals marked differences by respondents’ child-related gender progressivity.<sup>5</sup> More progressive respondents are less supportive of the conservative norm across all vignette scenarios, and respond more strongly to within-couple earnings differentials. In the *Mother earns more* scenario, only 40% of more progressive respondents support the mother staying home, compared with about 60% among less progressive respondents. We further examine heterogeneity by respondents’ *perceptions* of prevailing gender norms, which have been identified as an important driver of economic behavior beyond actual norms (Bursztyn et al., 2023). To do so, we elicit respondents’ second-order beliefs about the share of other respondents in their region

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<sup>5</sup>We measure gender progressivity using the mother-father difference in agreement with two established survey items: “Family life will suffer when the [mother/father] works full-time” and “The [mother/father] should reduce working hours when the child is not yet in school.”

who agree with the two items measuring gender progressivity. While we document substantial norm misperceptions, perceived regional gender norms do not systematically moderate treatment effects. Similarly, we find little heterogeneity across subgroups defined by socio-demographic characteristics or labor-market behavior.

In a robustness test, we examine whether agreement with the conservative gender norm is influenced by efficiency considerations related to statutory maternity leave. Under German law, mothers must take statutory maternity leave during the first eight weeks after childbirth, which could make continued maternal caregiving appear more efficient due to established routines or reduced switching costs. To assess whether this institutional feature affects support for the norm, we introduce a robustness treatment, the *Both parents 8 weeks* scenario. This treatment is identical to the *No specification* condition but explicitly states that *both* parents stay home during the first eight weeks. If maternity protection shapes gender attitudes through such efficiency considerations, support for the conservative norm should be lower in this robustness treatment. We find no such difference, providing no support for this channel.

We contribute to two strands of literature. First, the paper relates to the broad research on the relationship between gender norms and female labor-market outcomes. Many studies examine how gender norms are linked to labor-market participation, both descriptively (e.g., Fernandez et al. (2004) and Fortin (2005, 2015)) and causally (e.g., Bertrand et al. (2015), Fernández and Fogli (2009), and Jessen et al. (2024)). Leveraging field experimental data, Bursztyn et al. (2020) show that gender norms surrounding female labor supply shape women’s labor-market decisions. Motivated by the role of child penalties in explaining gender disparities in labor-market outcomes (Kleven & Landais, 2017; Kleven, Landais, & Sogaard, 2019; Kleven et al., 2025), recent experimental studies focus on the effects of gender norms on maternal labor supply (Cortés et al., 2024; Grewenig et al., 2026; Hermes et al., 2024). We contribute to this literature by shifting the focus to how earnings differences influence gender norms, thereby approaching the relationship between gender norms and maternal labor supply from the opposite direction.

Second, the paper contributes to the literature on the role of economic circumstances in shaping gender norms. Seguino (2007) provides descriptive evidence that women’s paid employment promotes more equitable gender norms. Similarly, Campa and Serafinelli (2019) show that in post-World War II divided Germany, changes in gender attitudes in East Germany were larger

in areas with stronger growth in female employment. Kleven and Landais (2017) document in a cross-country analysis that gender norms become more egalitarian as GDP rises. A related strand of research examines the long-run effects of economic conditions on gender norms. Studies by Alesina et al. (2013), Hansen et al. (2015), and Xue (2016) trace current differences in gender norms to historical variation in the division of labor. Our paper contributes to this literature by providing experimental micro-level evidence on how within-couple earnings differentials shape gender norms, complementing existing studies that examine broader economic changes where multiple mechanisms operate simultaneously.

Closest to our paper is Cortés et al. (2024), which, to our knowledge, is the only other study that experimentally examines the link between relative earnings and attitudes toward maternal labor supply. In contrast to our paper, the role of relative earnings in Cortés et al. (2024) is not the central object of inquiry. In their study, variation in relative earnings is introduced as part of the vignette environment and serves primarily as a robustness dimension, whereas the core focus is on how perceived social norms — and information correcting misperceived peer beliefs — shape respondents’ gender attitudes in the U.S. context. Our paper also differs conceptually in the stage of family formation at which we study labor-supply attitudes. Cortés et al. (2024) vary relative earnings within a more complex post-birth childcare scenario involving a four-year-old child. We instead consider different *pre*-childbirth earnings scenarios and elicit attitudes toward parental labor supply during the first year after childbirth, i.e., at the initial allocation of paid work and childcare responsibilities. This difference in timing is important, as gendered earnings differences materialize right after childbirth and accumulate over time (Glogowsky et al., 2024). As a result, decisions about labor supply when children are older may reflect already-realized career prospects, childcare productivity, or parental preferences beyond the earnings information provided. Our design abstracts from these additional channels and isolates the effect of within-couple earnings differentials on gender norms at the initial allocation of work and care.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 presents our data and experimental design. Section 3 reports our results, and Section 4 concludes.

## 2 Data and Experimental Design

Our experiment was incorporated into the ifo Education Survey 2020, conducted by the ifo Institute Munich. The ifo Education Survey is an annual, cross-sectional online survey on education-related topics with a representative sample of the German population aged 18 to 69 years (for further information and data access, see Freundl et al. (2022)). Our module includes the vignette experiment and questions on individual attitudes toward maternal labor supply. As shown in Table 1, respondents are on average 45 years old, and 50% are female. Around 40% have a tertiary education entrance qualification, and 54% have at least one child. Appendix Table A1 compares respondent characteristics with the German Microcensus 2020 and shows that the ifo Education Survey closely matches the population in terms of age, gender, education, employment, and region, with a slight overrepresentation of high-income individuals.

In the pre-registered vignette experiment (AEARCTR-0005958), we introduce a married couple, Sabine and Peter (i.e., typical German names), who are expecting their first child in four months. Both are employed full-time. For the first year after birth, they plan that after statutory maternity leave, one parent should stay home with the child and receive parental allowance while the other returns to full-time work.<sup>6</sup> In the control group (*No specification*), we do not specify parental pre-childbirth earnings. In three treatment groups, we vary the within-couple earnings differential. In an additional robustness treatment, we do not specify earnings but instead state that both parents stay home during the statutory maternity leave period. Respondents are randomly assigned to one of the five experimental groups, with approximately 2,000 respondents in each. Below, we describe each condition in turn.

The wording of the *No specification* vignette (translated from German) reads as follows:

*Sabine and Peter are married and are expecting their first child in four months. Currently, Sabine and Peter are both in full-time employment. The two have the following plan for the first year after the birth of their child: After the statutory maternity leave (until 8 weeks after the birth), one parent should not go to work, and instead stay home with the child and receive parental allowance. The other parent should go to work full-time to earn money.*

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<sup>6</sup>Parental allowance in Germany amounts to 65% - 67% of previous net income over the last 12 months.

The vignettes in the *Mother earns less*, *Equal split*, and *Mother earns more* scenarios contain the following information about the within-couple earnings differential. *Mother earns less*: “Sabine earns 1,400 Euros net per month, Peter earns 1,800 Euros.” *Equal split*: “Sabine earns 1,600 Euros net per month, Peter earns 1,600 Euros.” *Mother earns more*: “Sabine earns 1,800 Euros net per month, Peter earns 1,400 Euros.” In both the *Mother earns more* and *Mother earns less* scenarios, the earnings gap between mother and father amounts to 22%.

As in the baseline scenario, the *Both parents 8 weeks* scenario does not provide earnings information but instead states that both parents stay home during the first eight weeks: “During the statutory maternity leave (until 8 weeks after the birth), Sabine and Peter are at home and do not go to work.” We include this robustness treatment to test whether efficiency considerations related to statutory maternity leave affect responses. Under German law, mothers must take mandatory maternity leave during the first eight weeks after birth, which could make continued maternal caregiving appear more efficient due to established routines or reduced switching costs, irrespective of the earnings differential. Comparing the *No specification* and *Both parents 8 weeks* groups allows us to assess whether such efficiency considerations drive responses.

After reading one of the five scenarios, respondents are asked for their recommendation. The question reads: “What do you think Sabine and Peter should do for the first year of their child’s life after maternity leave?” Respondents choose between two answer options: “Sabine should not go to work, and Peter should go to work full-time.” and “Peter should not go to work, and Sabine should go to work full-time.” Our outcome variable equals one if respondents recommend that Sabine stay home and Peter return to full-time work, and zero if they recommend that Peter stay home and Sabine return to full-time work.

Table 1 reports balancing tests across experimental groups. We regress socio-demographic characteristics on treatment dummies and find no systematic differences between groups. Out of 56 pairwise comparisons, only one is statistically significant at the five percent level and one at the ten percent level — consistent with what would be expected by pure chance. Thus, randomization worked as intended.

Table 1: Balancing Table

	Control Group Mean	Treatment Groups (Difference to Control Mean)				Joint F-test (p-value)
		Mother Earns Less	Equal Split	Mother Earns More	Both Parents 8 Weeks	
Age	44.944	-0.116 (0.499)	0.013 (0.505)	-0.51 (0.5)	0.043 (0.502)	0.421 (0.794)
Female	0.494	0.015 (0.017)	0 (0.017)	0.002 (0.017)	0.004 (0.017)	0.267 (0.899)
Being employed	0.718	-0.017 (0.016)	-0.011 (0.016)	0.01 (0.015)	0.012 (0.015)	1.305 (0.265)
Net household income	10.284	0.224 (0.161)	0.112 (0.158)	0.207 (0.161)	0.291* (0.16)	1.002 (0.405)
West Germany	0.811	-0.017 (0.014)	-0.001 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.014)	-0.003 (0.014)	0.524 (0.718)
Born in Germany	0.939	0.005 (0.008)	0.008 (0.008)	0.001 (0.008)	0.012 (0.008)	0.784 (0.535)
Migration background	0.085	0.005 (0.01)	0.005 (0.01)	0.011 (0.01)	0.003 (0.01)	0.348 (0.846)
<b>Highest School Degree</b>						
Middle school degree	0.283	-0.001 (0.015)	0.003 (0.015)	-0.001 (0.015)	0.003 (0.015)	0.041 (0.997)
Uni. entrance qualification	0.398	0.013 (0.016)	-0.003 (0.016)	0.014 (0.016)	0.005 (0.016)	0.440 (0.780)
University degree	0.221	0.011 (0.014)	-0.016 (0.013)	0.022 (0.014)	0.011 (0.014)	2.327 (0.054)
<b>Parental Information</b>						
Having children	0.544	0.018 (0.017)	-0.013 (0.017)	0.004 (0.017)	0.018 (0.017)	1.252 (0.286)
Number of children	1.017	0.089** (0.043)	0.026 (0.041)	0.01 (0.04)	0.06 (0.041)	1.457 (0.213)
Small child working gap <sup>1</sup>	-0.406	0.004 (0.026)	-0.034 (0.026)	-0.028 (0.026)	-0.002 (0.025)	0.923 (0.449)
Parental leave gap <sup>1</sup>	14.372	-1.119 (0.815)	-0.602 (0.838)	0.4 (0.845)	-0.033 (0.822)	1.070 (0.369)
<i>N</i>	2059	2064	2061	2047	2034	10265

*Note:* Table summarizes results from regressing each socio-demographic variable on all experimental groups. Each line represents a separate regression. The *No Specification* Scenario is the baseline category. Net household income is indicated in income classes ranging from below € 400 up to € 5,000 and more (in steps of € 250). Average income class 10 corresponds to a net household income ranging from € 2,250 to € 2,500. West Germany is a dummy equaling 1 if a respondent lives in a former West German state, and 0 if a respondent lives in a former East German state. Migration background is a dummy equaling 1 if both parents of respondents are not born in Germany, and 0 otherwise. Univ. entrance qualification is a dummy equaling 1 if a respondent has a higher education school degree, and 0 otherwise. Small child working gap indicates the work status difference between partners. It is -1 if the mother did not work but the father worked at least part-time, 0 if both worked when the child was small (before school entry age) and 1 if the mother worked at least part-time while the father did not. The parental leave gap corresponds to the parental leave months difference between mothers and fathers. Positive (negative) values indicate that the mother (father) took more parental leave months than the father (mother). Survey-weighted linear regressions with robust standard errors in parentheses. Significance levels: \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01.

Source: ifo Education Survey 2020.

1: The variables small child working gap and parental working gap are computed for the parents sample with total N = 5,657 (1,125; 1,151; 1,110; 1,127; 1,144).

### 3 Results

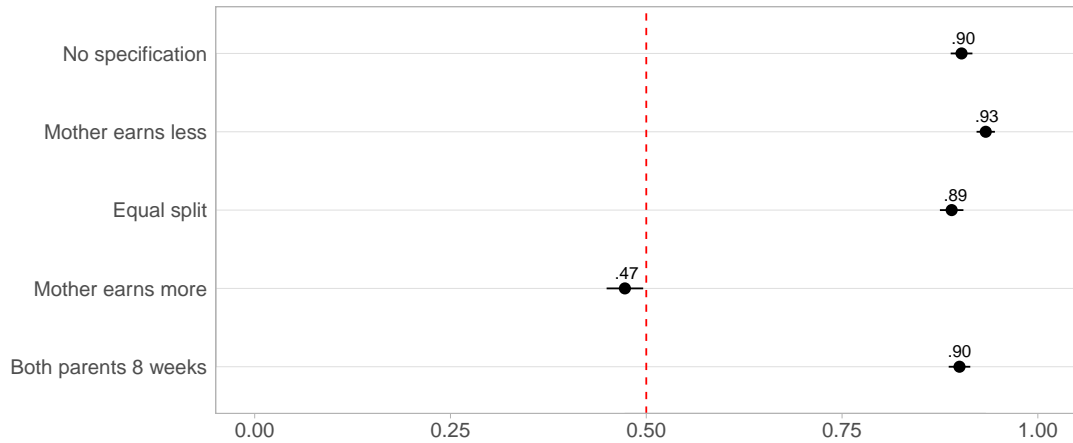
#### 3.1 Main Results

Figure 1 presents the results of the vignette experiment. In the absence of earnings information (*No specification*), 90% of respondents recommend that the mother stay home to care for the child. Providing information that the father earns more than the mother (*Mother earns less*) slightly increases support for the mother staying home to 93% ( $p < 0.01$ ). In the *Equal split* treatment, where there is no earnings differential between partners, support is statistically indistinguishable from the baseline: 89% of respondents ( $p = 0.23$ ) recommend that the mother stay home. Since adhering to the conservative norm entails no loss in household income in this scenario, respondents face no economic trade-off when recommending that the mother stay home. Consistent with this, a majority continue to support the traditional breadwinner model even when both parents earn the same amount.

In the *Mother earns more* treatment group, support for the conservative gender norm drops sharply to 47% ( $p = 0.000$ ), implying that 53% of respondents recommend that the father stay home with the child. This result has two implications. First, the large decline of 43 percentage points compared to the *No specification* scenario indicates a strong reaction to the earnings differential and suggests that respondents partly follow “best-practice considerations” (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004; Cialdini & Trost, 1998). When the mother earns more, a majority support her returning to full-time work, which maximizes household income. At the same time, nearly half of respondents still prefer the mother to stay home despite the associated loss in family earnings. If the conservative gender norm were fully driven by within-couple earnings, we would observe a symmetric shift in support when moving from the *Mother earns less* to the *Mother earns more* scenario. In that case, support in the *Mother earns more* treatment would fall to around 7%. Since observed support remains substantially higher, the results indicate that the conservative gender norm is partly — but not fully — driven by within-couple earnings considerations.

Figure 1 also provides evidence that efficiency considerations related to statutory maternity leave are not the reason for the high level of conservativeness in our sample. If efficiency considerations would drive responses, explicitly stating that both parents stay home during the first

Figure 1: Support for Mother Staying Home



*Note:* The figure displays the share of respondents recommending that the mother should stay home to care for the child while the father should go back to work full-time. Effects are displayed for the control group (*No Specification* scenario) and the three treatment groups (*Mother Less*, *Equal Split*, *Mother More* scenarios) while the "Both parents 8 weeks" group displays robustness results. We compute averages (point estimates) and confidence intervals (line ranges). Means and standard errors are calculated using survey weights. Source: ifo Education Survey 2020.

eight weeks should reduce support for the conservative gender norm. We find no such effect. Support in the *Both parents 8 weeks* group remains at 90%, statistically indistinguishable from the *No specification* group ( $p = 0.79$ ).

Table 2 presents our main results in a regression framework. Column 1 reports unconditional treatment effects, while Column 2 shows treatment effects controlling for age, gender, state of residence, education, employment status, household income, migration background, parenthood status, and the number of children. Including controls leaves our results unchanged. Therefore, we report unconditional treatment effects in the subsequent heterogeneity analysis.

Table 2: Support for Mother Staying Home

	<i>Dependent variable:</i> Mother should stay home (=1)	
	(1)	(2)
<i>Mother earns less</i>	0.031*** (0.009)	0.028*** (0.009)
<i>Equal split</i>	-0.013 (0.010)	-0.013 (0.010)
<i>Mother earns more</i>	-0.430*** (0.014)	-0.431*** (0.014)
<i>Both parents 8 weeks</i>	-0.003 (0.010)	-0.004 (0.010)
Control mean: <i>No Specification</i>	0.903	
Control variables	No	Yes
<i>N</i>	10,265	10,265

*Note:* Table summarizes results from regressing support for the mother staying home on the four treatment group dummies: *Mother earns less*, *Equal split*, *Mother earns more* and *Both partners 8 weeks*. The *No Specification* group is the control group. The support dummy takes the value 1 if respondents agree that the mother should stay home, and 0 otherwise. In column 2, we additionally add the following control variables: age, being female, being employed, living in West Germany, net household income, being born in Germany, having a university entrance qualification, having a migration background (both parents not born in Germany), being a parent and the number of children. Survey-weighted linear regressions with robust standard errors in parentheses. \*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01. Source: ifo Education Survey 2020.

### 3.2 Heterogeneity Analyses

Next, we examine whether treatment effects vary across relevant subgroups. We focus on three sets of variables: child-related gender progressivity (mother–father differences in two normative statements), socio-demographic characteristics (gender and parental status), and labor-market behavior (mother–father differences in employment when children are young and in the duration of parental leave).

**Heterogeneity by Gender Progressivity.** We first split the sample by respondents’ child-related gender progressivity. To measure this construct, we elicit first-order attitudes toward two statements: (1) “Family life suffers when the [mother/father] works full-time,” and (2) “The [mother/father] should reduce working hours when the child is not yet in school.” Each statement is asked separately for mothers and fathers, which allows us to distinguish gender-conservative norms from gender-equal but child-centered views.<sup>7</sup> Responses are recorded on a four-point scale from 1 (full agreement) to 4 (full disagreement). For each statement, we compute the difference in agreement when the norm refers to the mother rather than the father. A negative difference indicates stronger agreement when the statement refers to the mother. We construct a dummy equal to one if this difference is negative and zero otherwise.<sup>8</sup> On average, 26% of respondents agree more strongly that family life suffers when the statement refers to the mother, and 35% agree more strongly that working hours should be reduced when the statement refers to the mother.

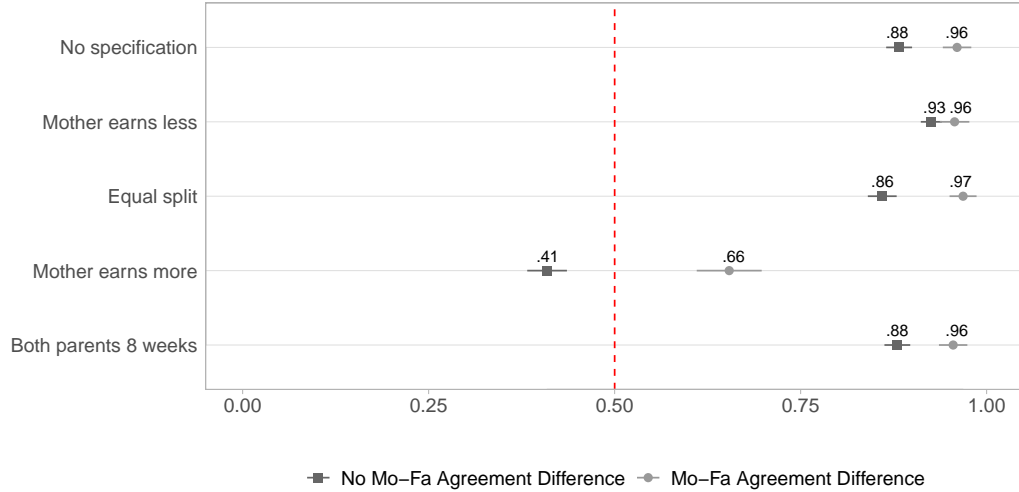
We split the sample according to the two gender progressivity dummies and present the results in Figure 2, which reports unconditional group means by treatment. Panel (a) refers to the statement that family life suffers when a parent works full-time, and panel (b) to the statement that a parent should reduce working hours when the child is not yet in school. Light gray dots represent the group with stronger agreement when the statement refers to the mother, while dark gray rectangles represent the group for which this is not the case. As Figure 2 shows, more progressive respondents exhibit significantly lower support for the mother staying home

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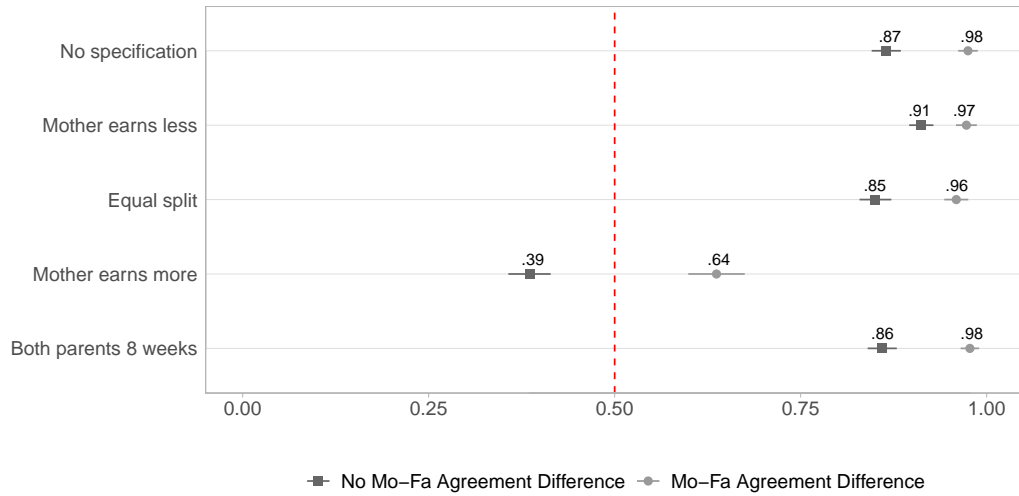
<sup>7</sup>Our approach differs from Kleven (2022), who constructs a gender progressivity index from three standard survey items on gender roles and maternal employment. Unlike our mother–father comparison, these items are not elicited symmetrically for mothers and fathers and therefore do not allow distinguishing gender-asymmetric norms from gender-equal but child-centered views.

<sup>8</sup>Respondents who express stronger agreement when the norm refers to the father are coded as zero.

Figure 2: Support for Mother Staying Home: Mother-Father Norm Differences



(a) Agreement to Statement: 'Family life will suffer when the [mother/father] works full-time'



(b) Agreement to Statement: 'The [mother/father] should reduce working hours'

*Note:* The figure displays the share of respondents recommending that the mother should stay home to care for the child. We report weighted means for two sample splits based on the norm statements: 'Family life will suffer when the [mother/father] works full-time' (a), and 'The [mother/father] should reduce working hours when the child is not yet in school' (b). Respondents agree to the norm on a four-point Likert scale with 1 equaling full agreement and 4 equaling full disagreement. Each norm statement is referring separately to the mother and the father and we calculate the mother-father (Mo-Fa) agreement difference. The more negative the agreement difference is, the more do respondents agree to the statement when it refers to the mother. A value of 0 indicates no difference in normative views toward mothers and fathers. We create an agreement difference dummy and assign the value 1 if the mother-father norm difference is negative, and 0 otherwise. Means and standard errors are calculated using survey weights. Source: ifo Education Survey 2020.

across all scenarios ( $p \leq 0.012$ ). They also respond more strongly to earnings differentials. In the *Mother earns less* scenario, support for the mother staying home increases significantly, while in the *Mother earns more* scenario it decreases significantly. Less progressive respondents, by contrast, show support rates above 95% in all but the *Mother earns more* scenario. In that scenario, more than 60% of less progressive respondents still support the mother staying home, compared to around 40% among more progressive respondents.

Table 3 summarizes the regression results (Columns 1 and 2). The interaction terms confirm that reactions to earnings information in the *Mother earns less* and *Mother earns more* treatments differ significantly between groups ( $p < 0.01$ ), indicating greater sensitivity to earnings among more progressive respondents. However, the response remains asymmetric in both groups, implying that even among more progressive respondents support for the mother staying home is not fully driven by best-practice considerations. Finally, support in the *Both parents 8 weeks* treatment does not differ from the *No specification* group in either subgroup, providing no evidence that efficiency considerations drive the results.

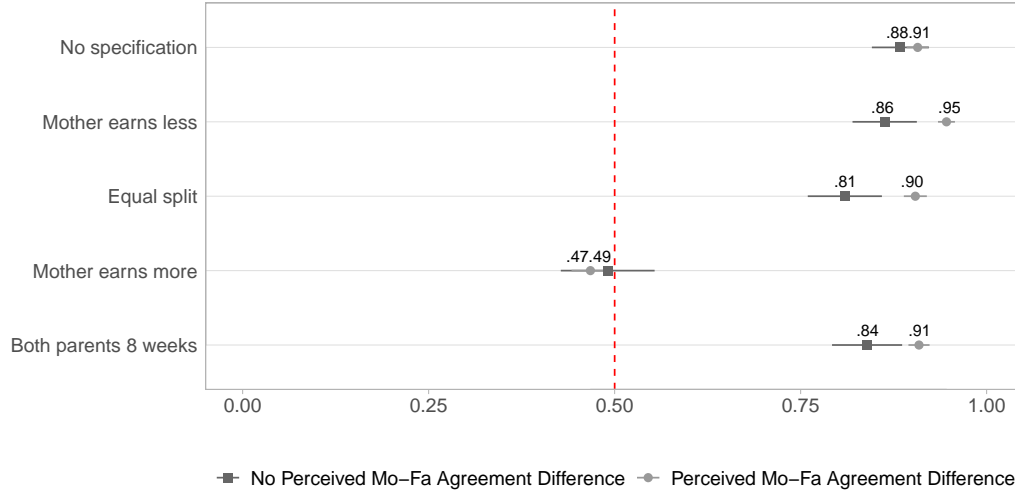
We further elicit respondents' second-order beliefs to examine whether perceived child-related gender progressivity in their region moderates treatment effects. After eliciting individual attitudes, respondents estimate the share of other respondents in their region who agree with the two norm statements. Specifically, they are asked: "What do you estimate is the proportion of all other respondents from the region in which you live (excluding your answers) who agree 'strongly' or 'somewhat' with the following statements?" For each statement, respondents provide a number between 0 and 100. To incentivize second-order beliefs, one statement is randomly selected, and respondents receive €1 if their estimate for that statement is among the most accurate 15% of all responses. We compute the perceived mother–father agreement difference. A positive value indicates that respondents believe more people in their region agree with the statement when it refers to the mother rather than the father, while a value of zero indicates no perceived difference. We construct a dummy equal to one if the perceived difference is positive and zero otherwise. When the dummy equals one (zero), respondents perceive gender norms in their region to be less (more) progressive. On average, respondents believe that 85% (84%) of others in their region show stronger agreement with the "Family life suffers" ("Reduce working hours") statement when it refers to the mother.

Table 3: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects: Mother-Father Norm Differences

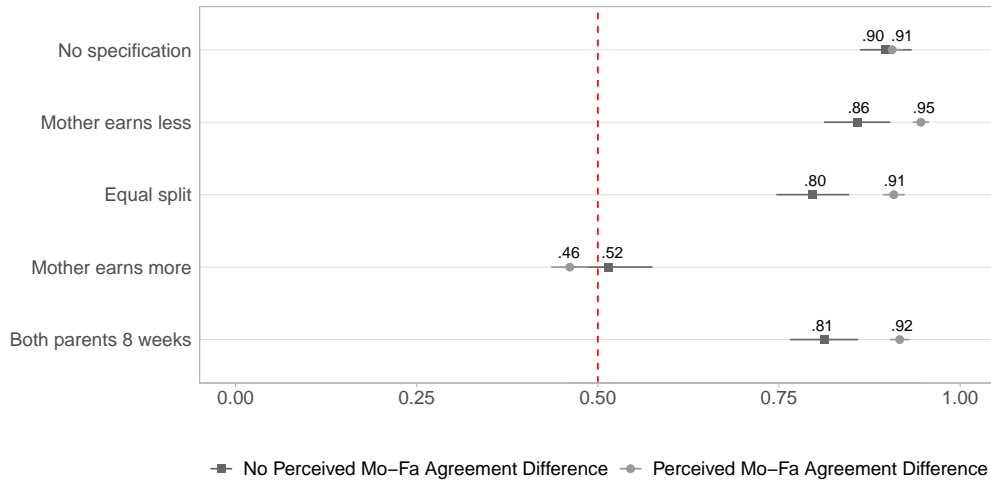
Mother-Father norm difference:	<i>Dependent variable: Mother should stay home (=1)</i>			
	Family life suffers when working full-time	Parent should reduce working hours	Family life suffers when working full-time: perception	Parent should reduce working hours: perception
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Treatment effects: No Mo-Fa Agreement Difference				
Mother earns less	0.043*** (0.011)	0.047*** (0.013)	-0.021 (0.029)	-0.040 (0.030)
Equal split	-0.023* (0.013)	-0.015 (0.015)	-0.075** (0.032)	-0.101*** (0.031)
Mother earns more	-0.473*** (0.016)	-0.480*** (0.018)	-0.393*** (0.038)	-0.382*** (0.036)
Both parents 8 weeks	-0.002 (0.013)	-0.005 (0.014)	-0.045 (0.031)	-0.085*** (0.030)
Interaction effects: Mo-Fa Agreement Difference ×				
Mother earns less	-0.047** (0.018)	-0.049*** (0.016)	0.060* (0.031)	0.079** (0.031)
Equal split	0.031 (0.019)	-0.001 (0.018)	0.072** (0.034)	0.103*** (0.033)
Mother earns more	0.167*** (0.029)	0.141*** (0.027)	-0.046 (0.041)	-0.063 (0.039)
Both parents 8 weeks	-0.003 (0.019)	0.008 (0.017)	0.047 (0.033)	0.096*** (0.032)
Agreement Dummy = 1	0.078*** (0.013)	0.110*** (0.012)	0.023 (0.021)	0.009 (0.020)
Constant	0.882*** (0.009)	0.865*** (0.010)	0.884*** (0.020)	0.898*** (0.018)
Treatment Effects: Mo-Fa Agreement Difference				
Mother earns less	-0.003 (0.014)	-0.002 (0.01)	0.039*** (0.01)	0.040*** (0.01)
Equal split	0.008 (0.013)	-0.016 (0.011)	-0.003 (0.011)	0.002 (0.011)
Mother earns more	-0.306*** (0.024)	-0.338*** (0.021)	-0.440*** (0.015)	-0.445*** (0.015)
Both parents 8 weeks	-0.005 (0.014)	0.003 (0.009)	0.002 (0.010)	0.010 (0.010)
Observations	10,265	10,265	10,133	10,127

*Note:* Table summarizes support for the mother staying home to care for the child. We report unconditional treatment effects for four sample splits based on the norm statements: "The family life will suffer when the [mother/father] works full-time" (columns 1 and 3) and "The [mothers/fathers] should reduce working hours" when the child is not yet in school (columns 2 and 4). Columns 1 and 2 report first-order beliefs relying on own normative judgments of respondents. We ask respondents to agree to a norm statement on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (full agreement) and 4 (full disagreement). Each norm statement is referring agreement toward the mother and the father and we calculate the mother-father agreement difference at individual level. We create an agreement difference dummy based on the mother-father norm difference and assign the value 1 if the difference is negative implying stronger support of a norm statement when it refers to the mother compared to the father, and 0 otherwise. Columns 3 and 4 report second-order beliefs (what respondents believe other respondents from their region think). In columns 3 and 4, the exact question wording reads as follows: "What do you estimate is the proportion of all other respondents from the region in which you live (excluding your answers) who agree 'strongly' or 'somewhat' with the following statements?" For all four norm statements, respondents indicate a number between 0 and 100 and we calculate the perceived agreement difference. A higher perceived difference indicates that respondents believe relatively more people in their region agree to a norm when it applies to a mother compared to a father. A value of 0 indicates no perceived difference. We create an agreement difference dummy and assign the value 1 if the perceived mother-father norm difference is positive, and 0 otherwise. In all columns, we regress the dependent variable (support for "mother should stay home") on the treatment group indicator variable and interact the treatment group variable with the sample split variable. In all columns, the *No Specification* group serves as baseline category. Survey-weighted linear regressions with robust standard errors in parentheses. \*p < 0.1; \*\*p < 0.05; \*\*\*p < 0.01. Source: ifo Education Survey 2020.

Figure 3: Support for Mother Staying Home: Perceived Mother-Father Norm Differences



(a) Agreement to Statement: 'Family life will suffer when the [mother/father] works full-time'



(b) Agreement to Statement: 'The [mother/father] should reduce working hours'

*Note:* Figure displays the share of respondents recommending that the mother should stay home to care for the child. We report weighted means for two sample splits based on perceived mother-father differences in norm statements. The exact wording reads as follows: 'What do you estimate is the proportion of all other respondents from the region in which you live (excluding your answers) who agree 'strongly' or 'somewhat' with the following statements?': 'Family life will suffer when the [mother/father] works full-time' (a), and 'The [mother/father] should reduce working hours when the child is not yet in school' (b). For all four statements, respondents indicate a number between 0 and 100 and we calculate the perceived agreement difference in a norm statement. A higher perceived difference indicates that respondents believe relatively more people in their region agree to a norm when it applies to a mother compared to a father. A value of 0 indicates no perceived difference in normative views toward mothers and fathers. We create an agreement difference dummy and assign the value 1 if the perceived mother-father norm difference is positive, and 0 otherwise. Means and standard errors are calculated using survey weights. Source: ifo Education Survey 2020.

Figure 3 shows that respondents who perceive regional gender norms to be less progressive exhibit slightly higher support for the conservative gender norm across treatment groups. Although some differences are statistically significant, they are small in economic magnitude. One exception is the reaction to the earnings information in the *Equal split* scenario (columns 3 and 4 in Table 3): respondents who perceive regional norms as less conservative significantly decrease their support for the mother staying home when equal earnings are explicitly stated. Notably, support for the mother staying home in the *Mother earns more* scenario does not differ between the two groups. Overall, Figure 3 indicates that perceived gender norm progressivity does not systematically moderate treatment effects.

**Heterogeneity by Socio-demographic Characteristics and Labor-Market Behavior.** We further split the sample by socio-demographic characteristics (gender and parental status) and, for parents, labor-market behavior (mother–father differences in parental leave duration and work status during the first years after birth). In addition, we explore other potentially relevant sources of heterogeneity using the causal forest methodology of Athey and Wager (2019) and Wager and Athey (2018). Beyond individual and perceived gender progressivity, this approach identifies age as a potentially relevant determinant of treatment heterogeneity. Overall, these analyses reveal only small differences across subgroups and no systematic differences in responses to the treatments. Detailed results are reported in the Supplemental Appendix, Part B.

## 4 Conclusion

This study examines whether conservative gender norms partly reflect labor-market circumstances. Using a large-scale vignette experiment in Germany, we provide causal evidence that within-couple earnings differentials shape attitudes toward maternal labor supply. While support for the conservative norm that mothers should stay home remains pervasive, it responds strongly — yet asymmetrically — to changes in relative earnings. This pattern suggests that gender norms partly reflect “best-practice considerations” about household income, but are not fully determined by them.

Our findings contribute to a better understanding of the reverse channel in the relation-

ship between gender norms and labor-market outcomes. Economic incentives influence gender attitudes, but deeply rooted norms persist even when they conflict with income-maximizing considerations. Moreover, more gender-progressive individuals respond more strongly to earnings information, whereas less progressive respondents adhere to traditional norms even when financially costly. Taken together, our results underscore that labor-market circumstances can shift gender attitudes. This suggests that public policies targeting earning inequality by gender are relevant and necessary to challenge entrenched norms. Yet, economic circumstances alone are unlikely to overturn them.

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## Appendix A

Table A1: Descriptive Statistics: Comparison of Microcensus and Survey Data

	ifo Education Survey 2020	Microcensus 2020
Age (years)	44.831	46.292
Female	0.498	0.500
University entrance qualification	0.404	0.402
Employed	0.717	0.742
High income	0.358	0.587
Born in Germany	0.945	0.993
2nd generation migrant	0.090	0.043
North	0.084	0.099
South	0.293	0.238
East	0.175	0.213
West	0.449	0.450
N	10,265	266,200

*Note:* Table displays the mean value of basic covariates from the Microcensus in Germany 2020 and the experiment sample of the ifo Education Survey (applying survey weights). "Female" is a binary variable with value one for female respondents. "Age (years)" is the age of the respondent. "University entrance qualification" is a binary variable taking value one if the respondent has completed tertiary education entrance qualification (German "Abitur"). "Born in Germany" is a dummy variable taking the value 1 if the respondent is born in Germany. "2nd Generation migrant" is a binary variable taking value 1 if both parents of the respondent were not born in Germany. "Employed" is a dummy variable taking the value one if the respondent is employed full-time, part-time, or self-employed. "High income" is a dummy variable taking value one if the respondent reports a net household income at or above EUR 3,000 per month. "North", "West", "South", and "East" are binary variables taking value one if the respondent lives in the respective region. More specifically, the "North" dummy contains the states Schleswig-Holstein, Hamburg, Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, and Bremen. The "East" dummy contains the states Berlin, Brandenburg, Saxony-Anhalt, Saxony, and Thuringia. The "South" dummy contains the states Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria. The "West" dummy contains the states Lower Saxony, North Rhine-Westphalia, Hesse, Rhineland-Palatinate, and Saarland.

## Appendix B

In this part, we describe further results of the heterogeneity analysis and split our sample by (1) socio-demographic variables, (2) labor market behavior and (3) variables determined relevant in a causal forest approach. Overall, the subsample analysis suggests that treatment effects are not driven by any particular subgroup.

First, we split the sample according to relevant socio-demographic characteristics and report results separately depending on gender and parent status of respondents. Panel (a) of Figure B1 depicts support for mother staying home depending on respondents' gender. In the *Mother earns less* scenario, 92% of women and 88% of men support mothers staying home. In the *Mother earns more* scenario, support falls to 49% and 46%, respectively. Differences between male and female respondents are statistically significant only in the *No specification* and *Mother earns less* scenario. Regressing support for the mother staying home on the interaction between the treatment group indicator variable and female dummy provides no evidence of heterogeneous treatment effects (Table B1, column 1). Panel (b) of Figure B1 summarizes results for respondents with and without parent status. Parents exhibit higher support compared to non-parents for the mother staying home. In the *Mother earns less* scenario, 93% of parents and 87% of non-parents favor mothers staying home; in the *Mother earns more* scenario, the figures are 50% and 44%, respectively. Support decreases slightly in the *Equal split* scenario but remains high overall. Again, interaction terms reported in column 2 of Table B1 are not statistically significant suggesting no different reaction to the treatment.

Second, we analyze heterogeneity in treatment effects by splitting the sample according to differences in labor market behavior. We focus on two information in the dataset which were collected for respondents who are parents. First, we ask for duration of parental leave of the mother and father and take the difference between the two lengths to compute the parental leave gap (measured in months).<sup>9</sup> We create a dummy variable that takes the value 1 if the parental leave gap is above the median gap in the sample, and 0 otherwise. Second, we ask for the working status of respondents with children during the first years after birth of the oldest

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<sup>9</sup>On average, fathers take one month of parental leave while mothers take 15 months. The larger the gap, the more parental leave the mother took in comparison to the father.

child. We elicit this information for respondents and their partners, assign a value of 1 if a parent worked at least part time and take the difference between working status of mother and father. Comparing two dummy variables, a gap of -1 implies that the father worked at least part-time while the mother did not work. This work arrangement applies to 45% of respondents in our sample. A value of 0 indicates that both parents were working at least part-time. This situation applies to 51% of respondents in our sample. Only a small fraction of 4% reports that the father is/was not working while the mother works at least part-time. We split the sample and report results separately for the 'both parents' group where mother and father are/were working at least part-time when the child was small, and the 'one parent' group with only one parent working.<sup>10</sup> Figure B2 summarizes results for respondents with below vs. above median gap in parental leave (a) and respondents where both parents vs. only one parent were working when the oldest child was small (b). Respondents with an above-median parental leave gap, or with only one parent working during early childhood, also show slightly higher support, though differences are small. Parental leave gaps and early-childhood work arrangements do not yield significant interaction coefficients (Table B1, columns 3 and 4) indicating that treatment effects do not differ between groups. The only exception is that respondents from the 'one parent' group react more strongly in the *Mother earns more* scenario, though no consistent pattern emerges across treatments.

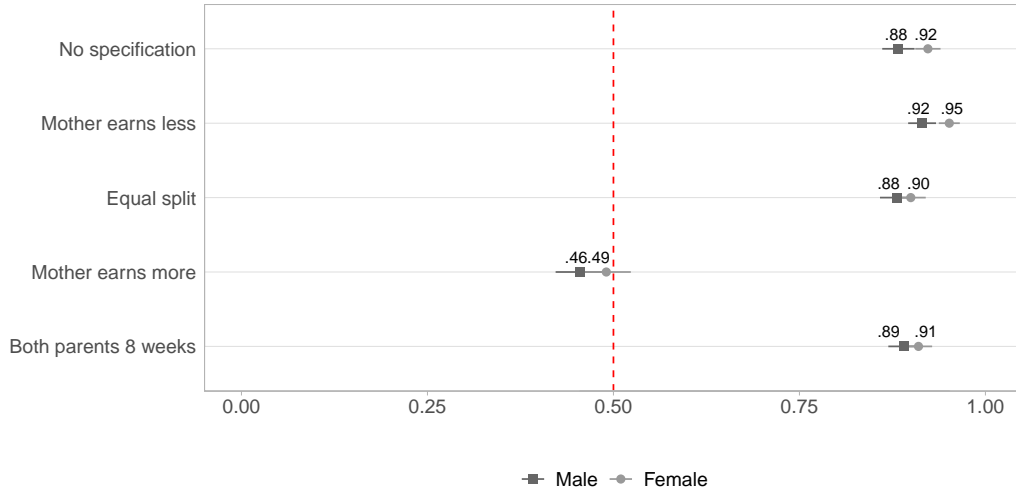
Third, we consider the causal forest approach by Athey and Wager (2019) and Wager and Athey (2018) to determine further potentially relevant variables. Besides gender progressivity, the causal forest suggests age as most relevant variable. Considering differences in treatment effects across experimental groups (Figure B3), older respondents are slightly more supportive of the mother staying home when she earns less or the same, or when parental earnings are not specified. When the mother earns more, however, support by older respondents decreases more compared to younger respondents.<sup>11</sup> While the difference in treatment effects is significant, the overall pattern does not point to fundamental behavioral differences between older and younger respondents.

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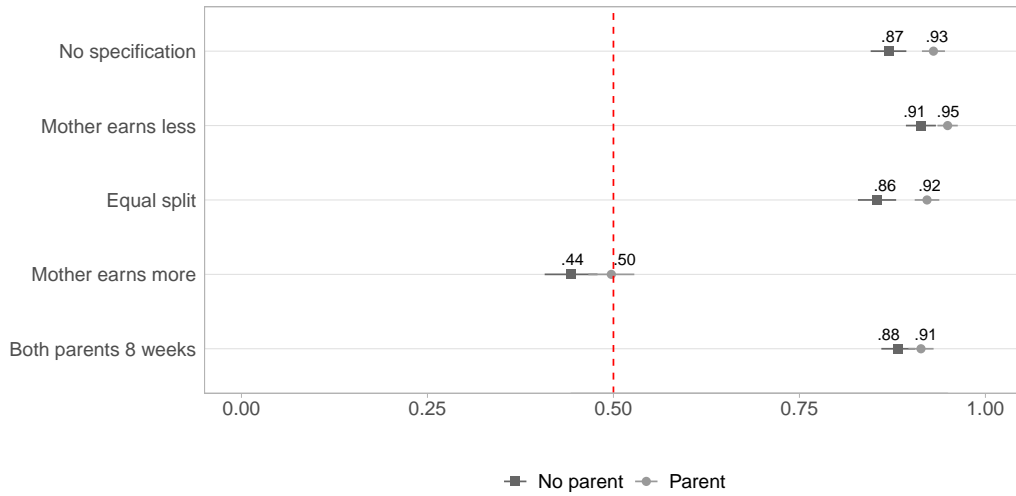
<sup>10</sup>In this group, for 92% of respondents the father is/was working while the mother does/did not work.

<sup>11</sup>See also Table B1, column 5.

Figure B1: Support for Mother Staying Home: Gender and Parent Status



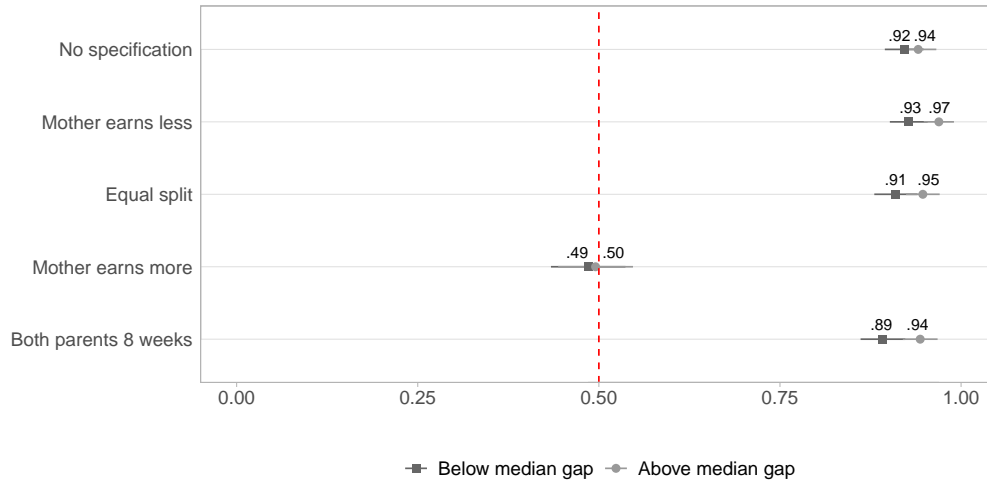
(a) Split by gender



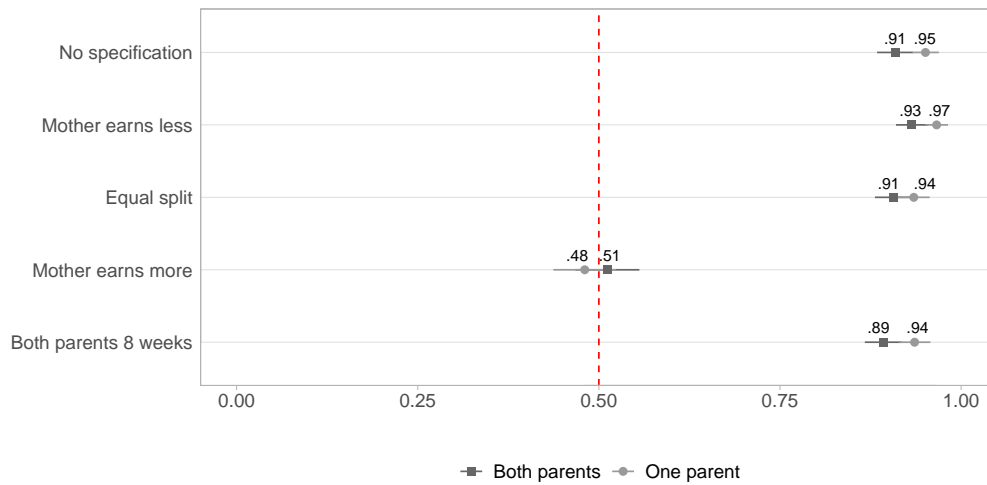
(b) Split by parent status

*Note:* The figure displays the share of respondents recommending that the mother should stay home to care for the child. In figure (a), we split the sample and report group means for female and male respondents separately. In figure (b), we split the sample in a parent and no parent sample. Means and standard errors are calculated using survey weights and displayed for the control group (*No Specification* scenario) and the three treatment groups (*Mother earns less*, *Equal split*, *Mother earns more* scenarios) while the "Both parents 8 weeks" group displays robustness results. We compute averages (point estimates) and confidence intervals (line ranges). Source: ifo Education Survey 2020.

Figure B2: Support for Mother Staying Home: Labor Market Behavior



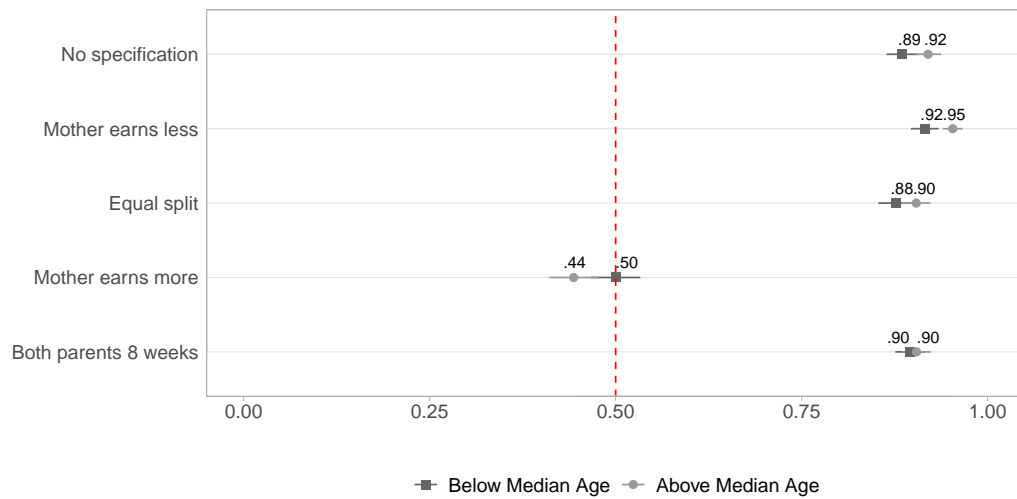
(a) Split by parental leave gap



(b) Split by small child working gap

*Note:* The figure displays the share of respondents recommending that the mother should stay home to care for the child. In figure (a), we split the sample at the median of the parental leave gap and assign the value 1 if the difference in parental leave between mother and father is above the median difference, and 0 otherwise. In figure (b), we split the sample according to the small child working gap. The 'small child working' variable measures whether parents were employed at least part-time during the first years after birth of the oldest child (before school entry). The question is asked separately for the mother and the father. In the "both parents" group, the mother and the father are/were working at least part-time when the child was small. In the "one parent" group, only one parent is/was working. Means and standard errors are calculated using survey weights and displayed for the control group (*No Specification* scenario) and the three treatment groups (*Mother earns less*, *Equal split*, *Mother earns more* scenarios) while the "Both parents 8 weeks" group displays robustness results. We compute averages (point estimates) and confidence intervals (line ranges). Source: ifo Education Survey 2020.

Figure B3: Support for Mother Staying Home: Age



*Note:* The figure displays the share of respondents recommending that the mother should stay home to care for the child. We split the sample at the median age and report group means for the below-median and above-median samples. The median age in our sample is 46 years. Means and standard errors are calculated using survey weights and displayed for the control group (*No Specification* scenario) and the three treatment groups (*Mother earns less*, *Equal split*, *Mother earns more* scenarios) while the "Both parents 8 weeks" group displays robustness results. We compute averages (point estimates) and confidence intervals (line ranges). Source: ifo Education Survey 2020.

Table B1: Heterogeneous Treatment Effects: Further Sample Splits

	<i>Dependent variable: Mother should stay home (=1)</i>				
	Female	Parent	Parental leave gap	Small child working gap	Above median age
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Treatment effects: Dummy = 0					
Mother earns less	0.032** (0.015)	0.044*** (0.016)	0.006 (0.019)	0.023 (0.017)	0.03** (0.014)
Equal split	-0.003 (0.016)	-0.015 (0.018)	-0.012 (0.02)	-0.003 (0.018)	-0.009 (0.016)
Mother earns more	-0.428*** (0.02)	-0.427*** (0.022)	-0.436*** (0.03)	-0.397*** (0.026)	-0.385*** (0.02)
Both parents 8 weeks	0.007 (0.015)	0.013 (0.017)	-0.029 (0.021)	-0.016 (0.018)	0.01 (0.015)
Interaction effects: Dummy = 1 ×					
Mother earns less	-0.003 (0.018)	-0.025 (0.019)	0.022 (0.025)	-0.008 (0.021)	0.003 (0.018)
Equal split	-0.02 (0.021)	0.007 (0.021)	0.018 (0.027)	-0.013 (0.023)	-0.007 (0.021)
Mother earns more	-0.005 (0.028)	-0.006 (0.028)	-0.009 (0.042)	-0.073** (0.035)	-0.091*** (0.028)
Both parents 8 weeks	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.03 (0.02)	0.032 (0.027)	0.001 (0.023)	-0.026 (0.02)
Dummy = 1	0.04*** (0.014)	0.06*** (0.015)	0.019 (0.019)	0.042*** (0.016)	0.034** (0.014)
Constant	0.883*** (0.011)	0.87*** (0.012)	0.922*** (0.014)	0.909*** (0.013)	0.885*** (0.011)
Treatment Effects: Dummy = 1					
Mother earns less	0.029** (0.011)	0.019* (0.011)	0.029* (0.017)	0.015 (0.012)	0.033*** (0.011)
Equal split	-0.023* (0.013)	-0.009 (0.012)	0.006 (0.017)	-0.016 (0.015)	-0.016 (0.013)
Mother earns more	-0.432*** (0.019)	-0.433*** (0.018)	-0.445*** (0.029)	-0.47*** (0.024)	-0.476*** (0.019)
Both parents 8 weeks	-0.013 (0.013)	-0.017 (0.012)	0.003 (0.018)	-0.015 (0.015)	-0.015 (0.013)
Observations	10,265	10,265	4,016	5,637	10,265

*Note:* Table summarizes support for the mother staying home to care for the child. We report unconditional treatment effects for five sample splits. Columns 1 and 2 report results for female/male and parent/non-parent respondents (Dummy = 1/0). In column 3, we split the sample at the median of the parental leave gap and assign the value 1 if the difference in parental leave between mother and father is above the median difference, and 0 otherwise. In column 4, we split the sample according to the small child working gap. The 'small child working' variable measures whether parents were employed at least part-time during the first years after birth of the oldest child (before school entry). In the "both parents" group (Dummy = 0), both mother and father are/were working at least part-time when the child was small. In the "one parent" group (Dummy = 1), only one parent is/was working. On column 5, the dummy = 1 for respondents with above median age, and 0 otherwise. In all columns, we regress the dependent variable (support for 'mother should stay home') on the treatment group indicator variable and interact the treatment group variable with the sample split variable. In all columns, the *No Specification* group serves as baseline category. Survey-weighted linear regressions with robust standard errors in parentheses. \*p< 0.1; \*\*p< 0.05; \*\*\*p< 0.01. Source: ifo Education Survey 2020.