

Changing life courses of women: How do German baby boomers differ from older cohorts?

Julia Simonson, Laura Romeu Gordo, and Nadiya Titova (German Centre of Gerontology, DZA)

Male and female biographies differ significantly even if in the last century labour participation of women increased. Female biographies are still often characterized by the combination of family and work. Since life courses – especially employment and family biographies – have implications for the way life is structured in old age, this double burden not only appears in diverging career opportunities and income levels, but also leads, together with the work oriented pension system in Germany, to large differences in pension benefits.

Against this background, this paper investigates the life courses of women, aged 16 to 45, in order to examine how biographies of women from the cohort of the baby boomers (1956-1965) have altered in comparison to older cohorts (1936-1945 and 1946-1955), particularly with regard to changes in life-course patterns. Concretely, we analyze whether female biographies have changed becoming more inhomogeneous, with the idea that there is more diversity in the way younger cohorts adapt their life-courses to the different employment and family responsibilities.

To investigate these questions we carry out sequence analyses, based on longitudinal data from the German Socio Economic Panel (SOEP). Grounded on the sequences a cluster analysis is performed to identify typical biographies of the three cohorts.

Results reveal that there have been several changes in female life courses. Biographies of younger cohorts have become more heterogeneous and labour participation has increased significantly, implying that women have diversified the way they combine the double burden of work and family. This is reflected for example in the increase of part time work and reduction of inactivity in the family formation years. Even for women who have a biography marked by inactivity ('typical housewife biographies') we observe changes. These biographies become more heterogeneous and we observe an increase in labour market participation of 'housewives' after the main family formation years, which may have positive effects on the old age provision of these women.