

Same love, same commute – Gender roles and commuting times in comparison

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ABSTRACT

Gender differences in commuting behavior are frequently attributed to traditional gender roles, which position women as primary caregivers and men as primary earners. This results in shorter commute times for women in different-sex partnerships. However, it remains underexplored whether these dynamics apply to same-sex couples or how intra-partnership commuting patterns manifest across relationship types. This study addresses this gap by analyzing gendered commuting disparities in same-sex (N = 579) and different-sex (N = 17,750) partnerships in Germany using data from the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) of 2019 and 2021.

In regression models of log-transformed commute times, all models control for age, migration background, and survey year, with cluster-robust standard errors at the couple level to account for interdependent observations. In different-sex partnerships, women exhibit significantly shorter commute times than men by 11 percentage points, a disparity persisting regardless of partners' education, sectoral employment, or intra-household labor division. Men are consistently more likely to be the longer commuter, even when controlling for their female partner's working hours, income, and care responsibilities.

In same-sex partnerships, however, the pattern diverges: women commute 4 percentage points longer than men, though this difference is statistically insignificant. Crucially, when controlling for factors like full-time employment, income, and care work, the gender gap increases in magnitude—suggesting that if women in same-sex relationships matched men's labor market participation, their commute times might lengthen further.

These findings reveal a critical inversion: while gender roles systematically constrain women's mobility in different-sex partnerships, same-sex couples exhibit no consistent gendered pattern. This implies that care work and stereotypical role expectations—not innate gender differences—drive reduced female mobility in heterosexual contexts. The results challenge deterministic interpretations of gendered commuting behavior, and emphasize that structural barriers, not individual preferences, limit women's spatial flexibility when traditional roles dominate.