The Impact of Social Support Networks on Maternal Employment:
A Comparison of Western German, Eastern German and Migrant Mothers

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Despite numerous advantages of a quick re-entry into the labor market, it is still common for German mothers to interrupt employment for several years after child birth. Lack of adequate child care is mentioned as the number one barrier to maternal employment. Given the shortages in (full-time) public child care in particular for the under-threes, this paper asks whether social support with child care and domestic chores by spouses, other relatives, friends and neighbors can relieve mothers from their responsibilities and home and thus facilitate their return to full-time or part-time positions within the first six years after birth.

Using SOEP data from 1992-2010 and event history methods for competing risks, I compare employment transitions of Western German, Eastern German and migrant mothers from southern and south-eastern Europe. The results indicate that Western German mothers have higher transition rates into both part-time and full-time employment if they have access to relatives living in the neighborhood. Having a spouse who regularly engages in housework encourages Western German mothers to work full-time. In contrast, access to social support networks does not affect employment transitions in eastern Germany where the availability of child care is a lot better and continuous female employment is a prevalent social norm. Migrant mothers hold the most traditional gender role values and have the lowest transition rates into employment of all three groups. For them, a partner who helps with domestic work, indicating a more gender-equal division of labor, increases the chance of entering full-time or part-time employment.