The Making of a Good Woman:
Motherhood, Leave Entitlements and Women’s Work Attachment

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Abstract

The paper addresses the relationship between family policy and women’s attachment to the labor market. Drawing on survey data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP), we exploit a series of policy changes since the mid-1980s in Germany that extended the length of statutory parental leave entitlements from 6 months to 3 years following childbirth. Using a set of difference-in-differences (DiD) and instrumental variables (IV) estimators, we obtain consistent empirical evidence that increasing generosity of leave entitlements led to a decline in mothers’ work commitment. The impact of policy change is evident among both West and East German mothers, and has been especially pronounced for the 1992 reform that expanded leave entitlements from 18 to 36 months following childbirth. We also probe some potential mechanisms underlying the observed policy impact. We find strong evidence for role exposure effects via prolonged duration of child-related employment interruptions, notably among women working prior to childbirth. Processes of norm setting also seem to be relevant as changes in work commitment are observed among both mothers entitled to parental leave and mothers without any leave entitlements. We obtain very limited evidence for the view that preference adaptation would be largely temporary and dissipate with child age.