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Women in the German labor market

The cost of being a mother

Initial findings regarding the coronavirus crisis' impact on the German labor market suggest that the existing dynamics of inequality will worsen in two respects – both between the sexes, and within the group of women alone. One thing is certain: Mothers in particular will lose out, as the following analysis shows that even before the crisis, children already cost mothers up to two-thirds of their lifetime earnings.

Even before the pandemic, the German labor market featured a twofold inequality with regard to gender and lifetime earnings, to the disadvantage of women generally, and again to the detriment of mothers as compared to women without children.

If we compare income differences between genders measured over the course of their entire working lives, women earn only about half as much as men (Bönke et al., 2020). Children are the crucial factor in this so-called **gender lifetime earnings gap**, as caring for

and rearing children is associated with a significant reduction in a mother's lifetime earnings. Only for women without children lifetime earning levels are converging with those of men.

This latter trend is also increasing the earnings gap between mothers and women without children, the so-called **motherhood lifetime penalty**. In other words, the loss of income associated with being a mother is rising over the course of time. In this regard, the figures speak for themselves: The current analysis shows that a woman's decision to have children leads to average losses in lifetime earnings ranging from around 40% (for one child) to nearly 70% (for three or more children).

Given these results, and the anticipated impact of the pandemic on the labor market, the gaps in inequality described here are likely to grow unless policymakers take decisive action to preclude such developments.

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Possible countermeasures range from making it easier to reconcile work and family life, to a reform of the mini-job regulations and the tax system's income splitting rule for married couples (so-called Ehegattensplitting), or even to assuring that those deemed to be essential workers receive better pay and stronger collective-bargaining coverage.

Introduction

The coronavirus crisis pinpoints and exacerbates numerous societal injustices and inequities, both in the labor market and elsewhere. A recent study in the United States shows that women have suffered disproportionate economic losses in the current crisis (Alon, Doepke, Olmstead-Rumsey, & Tertilt, 2020). In previous economic crises, it has been manufacturing jobs in particular, and thus predominantly male employees, that have been at risk. However, it is becoming apparent that a large share of the jobs in the services sector – jobs which are held primarily by women – could now disappear due to the effects of the coronavirus pandemic (Alon et al., 2020).

Initial evaluations show that this finding applies within the German labor market as well. The current crisis has had an especially severe impact within segments such as the hospitality sector, in which women are overrepresented in comparison to men and have thus been more broadly affected by job losses (Hammerschmid, Schmieder, & Wrohlich, 2020). Furthermore, almost 60% of the jobs held by workers deemed essential are in fact filled by women. Many such occupations are associated with below-average pay, and are accorded a relatively low social status (Koebe, Samtleben, Schrenker, & Zucco, 2020).

In addition to comprising a disproportionate share within the services sector – which in comparison to the manufacturing sector has less collective-bargaining coverage – women in Germany are more likely than men to be marginally employed (Hammerschmid et al., 2020). This means that they have less or even no protection through short-time work compensation programs, or through the top-up of short-time work benefits provided by employers (Hans-Böckler-Stiftung, 2020). Initial studies on increases in the unemployed population and the decline in employment among those holding mini-jobs also indicate that women have been more strongly affected than men by the loss of jobs (Hammerschmid et al., 2020; Gutensohn, 2020).

Moreover, it appears mothers have shouldered the bulk of the burdens stemming from the closure of childcare facilities and schools (Müller, Samtleben, Schmieder, & Wrohlich, 2020; Kohlrausch & Zucco, 2020; Arntz, Yahmed, & Berlingieri, 2020). An employment survey by the Institute of Economic and Social Research (WSI) found that 27% of the women polled, as compared to just 16% of the men, had reduced their working hours during the coronavirus crisis in order to take over care work following the closure of childcare facilities and schools (Kohlrausch & Zucco, 2020). Among couples that had previously divided childcare responsibilities evenly, 30% said that women had taken on more additional duties than men during the crisis.

Furthermore, due to a subordinate tax position as the second household earner, many women in jobs subject to social security contributions receive less short-time work compensation, even though they earn the same gross wage as men. The income splitting rule for married couples has for decades diminished the incentives for married women to take up employment or expand an existing job – with corresponding consequences for their labor market participation and the division of care work within the family.

These initial findings suggest that the crisis in the labor market is one thing above all: a female crisis. Berlin Social Science Center (WZB) President Jutta Allmendinger has consequently warned against an “appalling retraditionalization” (Allmendinger, 2020, p. 1) of gender roles. At this point in time, it is as yet impossible to place a specific figure on the income losses that will be suffered by women as a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic. However, there are many indications that the dynamics of inequality will persist and even intensify not only between the genders, but also between women with and without children.

In the following, we show the scale reached even before the crisis by this twofold inequality experienced over the course of a lifetime. To do so, we look more closely at the inequality in lifetime earnings 1) between men and women, and 2) between mothers and women without children. Thus, we use both the **gender lifetime earnings gap** and the so-called motherhood lifetime penalty to illustrate the average income losses women suffer for each (additional) child.

Inequalities between men and women in the labor market: Higher than previously assumed, even before the crisis

Current analyses of gender-specific income inequalities are mostly based on empirical cross-sectional data. For example, the German Federal Statistical Office's calculations of the gender pay gap are based exclusively on data from the given survey year (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2019). The cross-sectional analysis reveals the gender-specific pay gap in the average gross hourly wage at a given point in time, and thus references only the people employed in the labor market at that time. In 2019, the unadjusted gender pay gap was 20% (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2020).

However, the results of the Bertelsmann Stiftung-supported study "Wer gewinnt? Wer verliert? Die Entwicklung und Prognose von Lebenswerbseinkommen in Deutschland" [tr.: Who wins? Who loses? The development and forecast of lifetime earnings in Germany] (Bönke et al., 2020) show that these differences accumulate over the course of a lifetime, and that the inequality in lifetime earnings thus significantly exceeds that of gross hourly wages. In this study, the authors calculate the total av-

erage income that men and women can or are likely to earn between the age of 20 and 60 (see Box 1). The authors take into account the different stages of employment, and break down the income analysis according to the number of children. This enables them to render a comprehensive description of the labor market realities faced by men and women in general, as well as by men and women with and without children over the course of their lives.

For example, Bönke et al. (2020) note that the average lifetime earnings (in 2015 prices) of the youngest male cohort amount to about €1.5 million in western Germany and €1.1 million in eastern Germany, while on average, women – with comparable figures of €830,000 in western Germany and €660,000 in eastern Germany – earn only a little more than half that amount. This means that the gender lifetime earnings gap for the generation of women now in their mid-30s is around 45% in western Germany, amounting to €670,000, and 40% in eastern Germany, totaling around €450,000.

Figure 1 shows how the gender lifetime earnings gap has changed across cohorts. The horizontal line depicts the average lifetime earnings of men, to which the earnings of all other groups are compared.

BOX 1 The concept of lifetime earnings and the need for a longitudinal analysis

With their Bertelsmann Stiftung-supported study, Bönke et al. (2020) have created a comprehensive corpus of data for the analysis of lifetime earnings in Germany. Bönke et al. (2020) base their calculations of lifetime earnings on the data provided by the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), a representative household survey that has recorded survey respondents' annual incomes since 1984 (Goebel et al., 2018). They additionally use a multi-level microsimulation model to fill in missing data points for all relevant variables (e.g., marital status, number of children, income) in the past years, and to generate forecasts for future years. This enables gross lifetime earnings between the ages of 20 and 60, before taxes, contributions and transfers, to be simulated for men and women born between 1964 and 1985. The forecast is based on the assumption that current labor market trends will continue. It extends through the year 2045, when the data set's youngest cohort (born in 1985) will be 60 years old. Because the coronavirus crisis was not foreseeable at the time of the calculations, its effects could not be taken into

account in the analysis. Given that initial research findings regarding the effects of the coronavirus crisis indicate that women will be disproportionately affected, the following calculations of the gender lifetime earnings gap and the motherhood lifetime penalty likely constitute a rather conservative estimate.

The longitudinal analysis of incomes is therefore important because cross-sectional analyses depict the actual inequality of incomes only at a given moment. However, this inequity in fact mounts up between men and women over the course of the working life. Naturally, the examination of gross hourly wages at a single point in time is unable to capture differences between men and women with regard to the quantity of hours worked or periods of labor market inactivity over the extent of a life in employment. The Scientific Advisory Board of the German Federal Ministry of Finance also points out that the reliable assessment of income inequalities is possible only on the basis of lifetime earnings data (BMF, 2017).

The figure clearly shows that the overall gap between women's and men's lifetime earnings has narrowed only somewhat. Only women without children are showing any appreciable convergence with men, in terms of lifetime earnings. This underlines the fact that children have a particularly strong influence on women's earnings, and significantly less so for men – a finding that applies equally to older and younger cohorts. But why is that?

Why we still see a large gap between the genders' incomes, even in the younger generations

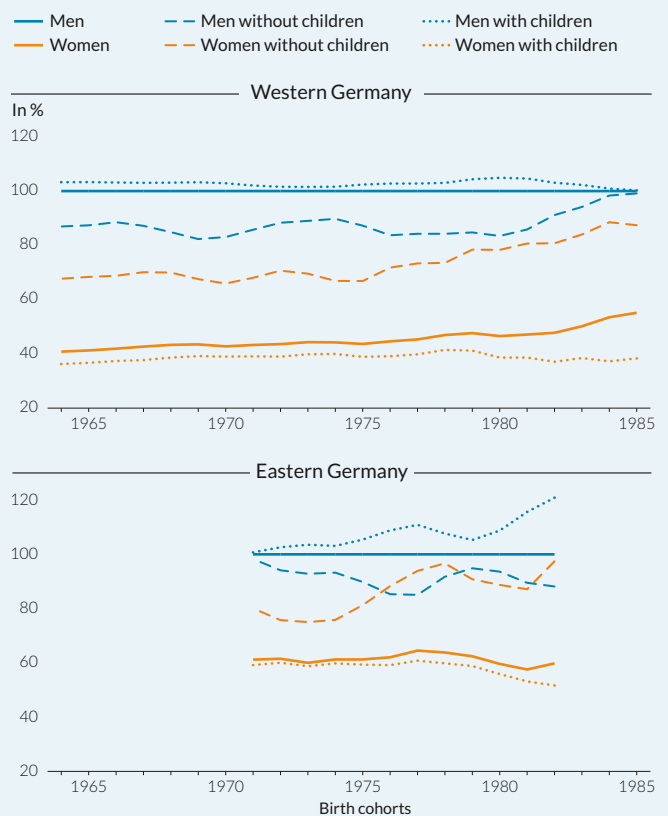
On the one hand, the expansion of education in recent decades has meant that women no longer trail men in any respect with regard to their level of education or labor market potential (Bönke, Harnack, & Wetter, 2019). On the other hand, a comparison between the patterns in the younger and older cohorts shows that starting a family still produces a traditional division of roles between men and women. This distribution of roles has the consequence that women are more likely than men to work part-time, and their employment histories more often feature periods of labor market inactivity than those of men. The longitudinal analysis of the various cohorts' stages of employment illustrates these relationships (see Figure 2).

Analyzing the average sum of years spent in the various employment stages shows that the number of years respectively spent by women and men in part-time work and inactivity have converged for the younger cohorts. This is explained primarily by the fact that on average, men are increasingly entering the labor market later due to the years spent in higher education. However, the number of working years spent by women in each of the various stages of employment has shown only minimal changes. This clearly indicates that women's higher average education levels are having only a negligible effect on the total volume of work. Although women's labor market qualifications commensurate with those of men, even younger women's working lives remain dominated by part-time work and characterized by longer periods of labor market inactivity than those of men.

The crucial factor here is the reality that the model of the male breadwinner, or of the woman as supplementary earner, remains de facto dominant in Germany (Hobler, Klenner, Pfahl, Sopp, & Wagner, 2017) despite other constellations that advocate a partnership-driven division of labor. Under this

FIGURE 1 Lifetime earnings of men and women both with and without children, in relation to the average lifetime earnings of men

normalized (average income of men = 100%)



Note: For women both in the West and East, the figure is to be read as follows: Women born in 19XX / with children / without children have expected average lifetime earnings of Y% of the average lifetime earnings of men the same age.
Source: Bönke et al. (2020).

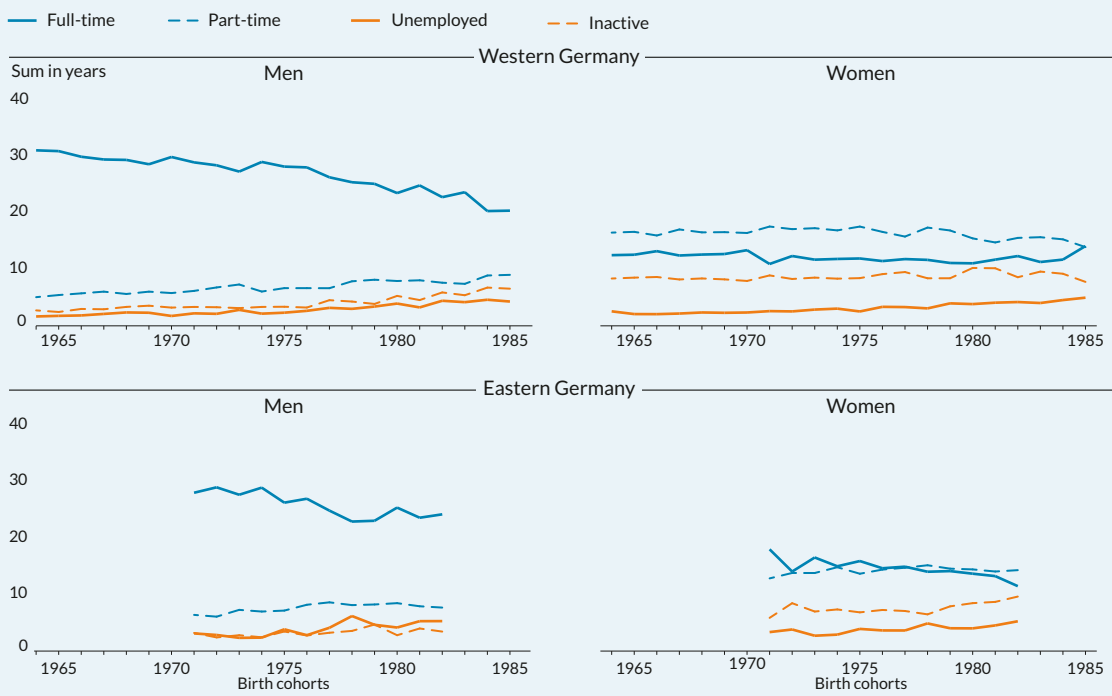
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model, the woman tends to work outside the home significantly less than the man, and unpaid work – caring for children, housework and care for relatives – tends to be done by the woman. For example, around half of the gender lifetime earnings gap is attributable to women's higher levels of part-time employment and longer periods of time away from the labor force.

The unequal division of care work is reflected in the differences between the genders with regard to their labor market participation over the employment cycle. Figure 3 shows the average percentages of men and women in the various stages of employment, in both eastern and western Germany, and at all times between the ages of 20 and 60.

The findings show little difference between men and women at the beginning of their working lives with regard to time spent in the various stages of

FIGURE 2 Stages of employment during the working life, compared by cohort



Note: Average sum of years in each employment status (full-time, part-time, unemployed, inactive) from the ages of 20 to 60, calculated for the birth cohorts from 1964 to 1985 in western Germany and from 1971 to 1982 in eastern Germany. Source: Bönke et al. (2020).

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FIGURE 3 Stages of employment across the employment cycle



Note: Proportion of all individuals between 20 and 60 years old actively participating in the labor market who are in the corresponding employment status (full-time, part-time and unemployed), as well as the proportion of economically inactive people, calculated for the birth cohorts between 1964 and 1985 in western Germany, and 1971 through 1982 in eastern Germany, in %. Source: Bönke et al. (2020).

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employment. This changes by the middle or end of their 20s, due to the decision to found a family. From this age on, part-time work is increasingly the dominant form of employment for women, while there is always a plurality of men in full-time work. Only by the middle 40s in eastern Germany, or the end of the 50s in western Germany, is a plurality of all women back in full-time employment.

Motherhood penalty: What it costs women to be a mother

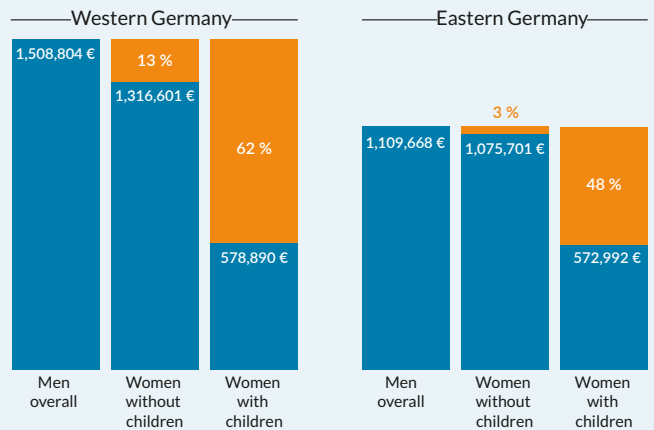
Overall, the results presented here make it clear that the differences in lifetime earnings between men and women are largely due to the fact that mothers engage in paid employment significantly less than men over the course of their working lives. While fathers earn up to 20% more than the average lifetime earnings of men (see Figure 1), the discrepancy for women remains the inverse: Over the course of their lives, women with children earn only about half as much as men. In the youngest cohort, the gender lifetime earnings gap for mothers is 62% in western Germany, and 48% in eastern Germany (see Figure 4).

However, comparing the lifetime earnings of men and women with children is of only limited use in determining precisely what it costs women to be mothers. This is because despite the fact that the gap between the lifetime earnings of women without children and those of men has narrowed, it has not yet closed altogether (see Figure 4).

For this reason, we must ask how much of lifetime earnings are lost by women with children in comparison to women without children, both in the past and today. This question is of increasingly urgent significance given the developments currently resulting from the coronavirus crisis. To render a more realistic approximation of the income loss associated with motherhood, we have to calculate the income gap between mothers and women without children, then further break this down according to the number of children. Thus, alongside the gender lifetime earnings gap, it is additionally worth considering the so-called motherhood lifetime penalty (see Box 2).

The following analysis of the motherhood lifetime penalty also builds on the findings of Bönke et al. (2020). Figure 5 depicts the absolute lifetime earnings of women across cohorts, broken down by the number of children. It demonstrates that each

FIGURE 4 The gender lifetime earnings gap in western and eastern Germany



Note: The blue bar represents the expected average gross lifetime earnings (in 2015 prices) for the various groups in western Germany (calculated for the 1985 cohort) and eastern Germany (for the 1982 cohort). The orange bar depicts the derived earnings gap of women both with and without children in comparison to the expected earnings of men.
Source: Bönke et al. (2020).

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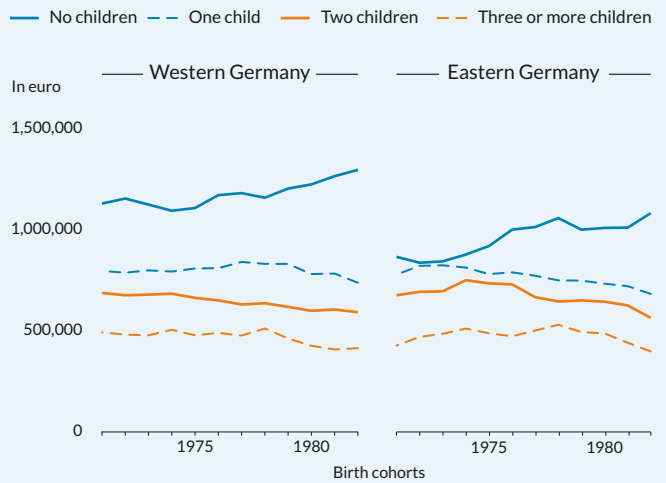
additional child is accompanied by significant losses in mothers' lifetime earnings.

Figure 6 quantifies the loss in lifetime earnings experienced by two cohorts of mothers, those born in 1971 and 1982, as compared to women born in the same years who did not have children. For example, over the course of their lives, childless women with in the youngest cohort earn an average of around €1.3 million in western Germany, and €1.1 million in eastern German (in 2015 prices). In the group of mothers of the same age, a child leads to an average loss of lifetime earnings of around 43% (western Germany) or 37% (eastern Germany; see Fig. 6). A second child reduces lifetime earnings by an additional 11% in both western and eastern Germany, so that the motherhood lifetime penalty rises to 54% or 48%. With three or more children, the average loss in comparison to women without children is 68% (western Germany) or 63% (eastern Germany).

Looking at the trend across cohorts, it can be seen that the motherhood lifetime penalty for younger mothers has increased significantly over time in both western and eastern Germany, with the difference being particularly pronounced in the states of the former East Germany for the first and second child (see Figure 6). This is partially due to the fact that the employment rate among women in eastern Germany in the early post-reunification years was still relatively high, but then fell significantly in the 2000s, particularly among younger workers (IAQ, 2019).

Overall, the trends across the various cohorts can be explained primarily by the fact that on average, childless women in the younger cohort are increasingly able to earn more over the course of their lives than it was or is possible for their counterparts in the older cohorts (see Figs. 1 and 4). This is partly due to the fact that women's employment rates have risen significantly since the 1970s. In the period from 1973 to 2013, the proportion of women holding paid employment doubled in western Germany (Bönke et al., 2019). At the same time, as noted above, women have caught up with men in terms of education levels, and can thus work in better-paid professions. However, the lifetime earnings of women with children have remained essentially constant across both the older and younger cohorts. This means that the opportunity cost of being a mother has risen significantly for younger women in comparison to members of older cohorts, because women without children have been able to close much of the gap to men with regard to lifetime earnings.

FIGURE 5 Lifetime earnings of women according to number of children



Note: Lifetime earnings between the ages of 20 and 60 in euros and in 2015 prices, calculated for the birth cohorts from 1971 through 1982 in western and eastern Germany as the rolling average across three cohorts, depending on the number of children.
Source: Bönke et al. (2020).

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BOX 2 The motherhood lifetime penalty

In calculating earnings losses that result from the decision to have children, we can distinguish between two separate concepts – the **child penalty** and the **motherhood penalty** – each of which is discussed intensively in the literature.

An analysis through the child penalty prism involves examining and comparing the effects of having children on men's and women's incomes. Studies in Europe and the United States often paint a similar picture of mothers showing long-term income losses, while men show no appreciable loss due to children (see, for example, Kleven, Landais, Posch, Steinhauer, & Zweimüller, 2019). This effect also appears in the analyses of lifetime earnings differences conducted by Bönke et al. (2020).

In the analysis of the so-called motherhood penalty, the focus is not on differences between the genders, but rather on the differences between women with and without children. In this case too, a large number of studies shows a child-specific pay gap between mothers and women without children (see, for example, Budig & England, 2001; Anderson, Binder, & Krause, 2003; Correll, Bernard, & Paik, 2007). Researchers have

attributed this pay gap to causes ranging from discrimination against mothers (particularly with regard to opportunities for promotion) to a decline in work productivity among mothers due to having started a family. Overall, however, the pay gap among women is determined by the complex interplay of a variety of factors. At present, the current literature on the motherhood penalty contains exclusively cross-sectional studies, which – like those addressing the gender pay gap – take differences in gross hourly or monthly wages as their point of reference.

In our analysis, we instead use data on women's lifetime earnings as a basis, broken down further according to the number of children. This allows us to supplement this previous perspective to include the differences that emerge over the course of an entire life. We therefore define the **motherhood lifetime penalty** as the gap in mothers' lifetime earnings in comparison to the earnings of women without children, as calculated in total at the end of the working life. Unlike the cross-sectional analysis, this method allows us to account for the effects of differences between the two groups of women with regard to the time spent in employment.

This trend is likely to be exacerbated by the current crisis. Mothers in particular have been forced to deal with financial losses and interruptions in their careers, because they – more often than men, and differently from women without children – have put aside their paid work in the current situation in order to take on care work (Jäkel, 2020; Schaaf, 2020; Kohlrausch & Zucco, 2020).

Policy options for addressing the twofold inequality

The analysis of the gender lifetime earnings gap and the motherhood lifetime penalty reveals both the extent of gender inequalities and the immense income losses women face when deciding to have children. Reduced working hours, increased care work, less short-time work compensation and the loss of jobs – all due to the current crisis – will perpetuate and exacerbate these inequalities. Policy measures designed to provide short-term help in managing the current situation, as well as medium- to long-term reforms, should thus always assess the potential impact on women and mothers. This is the only way to remedy these inequities.

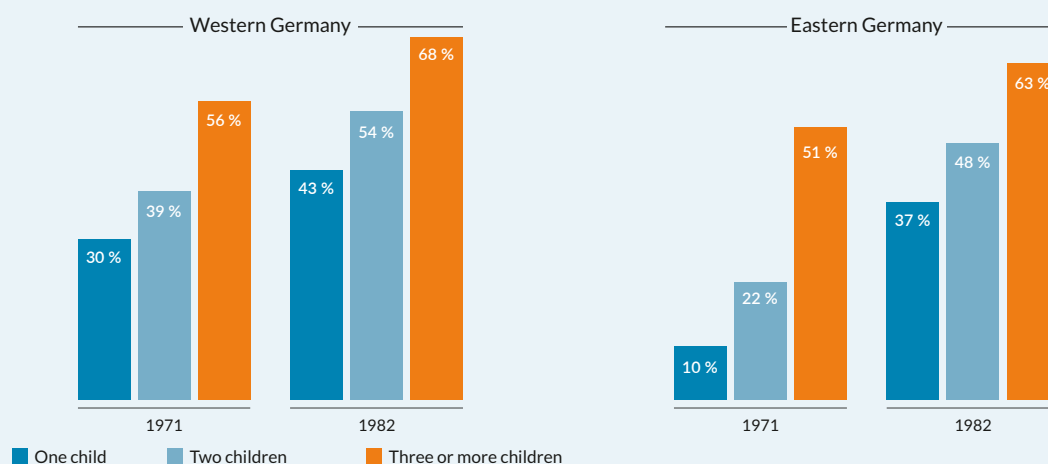
Given all of these concerns, policymakers should prioritize enabling parents to reconcile family and careers, and giving women and mothers a genuine opportunity to choose – and thus also opportunities to earn income. The importance of this task is underscored by the finding that women in Germany, especially those with top-level skills, have fewer children than they had originally planned (Jäkel, 2020; Schaaf, 2020; Kohlrausch & Zucco, 2020).

In this context, it is vitally important to rapidly expand high-quality childcare, and to provide good full-day programs for primary school children (Krebs & Scheffel, 2017; Krebs, Scheffel, Barišić, & Zorn, 2019). In addition, the legal and institutional framework must be modified to allow for a more even division of care duties and paid work between the genders. This necessarily includes the removal of currently misaligned incentives in the tax, contribution and transfer system that often make additional work for women and mothers unattractive. For example, a reform of the income splitting rule for married couples, with the goal of creating individual taxation with transferrable exemptions, could make it more attractive for women and mothers to expand their working hours (Peichl, Buhlmann, Löffler, Blömer, & Stichnoth, 2017).

However, a broader cultural change is also needed to bring about a more equal division of care duties and paid work between the genders. Women today still shoulder the bulk of the burden with regard to caring for children and caring for relatives (Geyer & Schulz, 2014; Samtleben, 2019), a practice that has only been cemented further in the course of the coronavirus crisis (Müller et al., 2020). In this regard, Germany needs to engage in a public debate regarding the provision of greater work-time flexibility – for mothers and fathers alike – and sufficient time for families.

In addition, policymakers should consider a reform of the mini-job system, as this type of employment is mostly carried out by women earning very low wages (Grabka & Göbler, 2020). For example,

FIGURE 6 Motherhood lifetime penalty for women born in 1971 and 1982



Note: The motherhood lifetime penalty indicates the proportion of lifetime earnings that women with children lose in comparison to women without children.
Source: Bönke et al. (2020), own calculations.

lowering the mini-job threshold could help provide incentives to transform mini-jobs into positions subject to social security contributions, which are generally associated with higher pay (Grabka & Göbler, 2020). This would be a better means of protecting women's incomes, even in times of crisis. Providing better pay and improved collective-bargaining coverage for occupations deemed essential would further help reduce the pay gap between men and women (Koebe et al., 2020).

These measures are also important because the persistent gender-specific gap in lifetime earnings presages the future discrepancy between men's and women's pension payouts. Recently, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimated the gender-related pension gap for Germany at 46%. The cross-OECD average is 25%. In this regard, Germany is in last place among the OECD countries (OECD, 2019).

Conclusion and outlook

The findings presented here examine the inequality of lifetime earnings between men and women, as well as between mothers and women without children. Two aspects in particular stand out.

On the one hand, the size of the **gender lifetime earnings gap** shows how important it is to examine earnings inequalities as measured over the course of a lifetime. A purely cross-sectional analysis of incomes by gender, as is typically undertaken in calculating the much-discussed gender pay gap, cannot capture the differences in earnings that build up between men and women over the course of their lives. Revealing the true extent of inequality in the labor market requires an examination of lifetime earnings; this in turn demands an analysis of differences between the genders with regard to pay and labor market participation across the entire working life. For example, women who are today in their mid-30s earn only about half as much as men. Children are the decisive factor in generating this difference, with the gap between the genders' lifetime earnings being primarily due to mothers' significantly lower levels of earned income.

On the other hand, the analysis also makes clear that women are increasingly facing a twofold inequality: that in relation to men, and that between mothers and women without children. The findings relating to the **motherhood lifetime penalty** reveal the scale that this twofold inequality – which

mounts up significantly over the course of a life – had reached even before the crisis. In recent decades, women's access to higher earned incomes has expanded significantly, due to the generally higher employment rates and rapidly rising education levels within this population. In turn, women without children have steadily been able to close the gap with men in terms of their lifetime earnings. This is a fundamentally positive development. However, given that the dominant societal model remains one of a male breadwinner, with women providing a supplementary income, this also means that the average income losses associated with motherhood have risen. In comparison with women who do not have children, a mother in her middle 30s today loses an average of between 40% (with one child) and nearly 70% (with three or more children) of her potential lifetime earnings. In addition, the cross-cohort view reveals the rise in this relative income loss. The motherhood lifetime penalty for younger mothers has increased significantly over the course of time.

Overall, the findings relating to the gender lifetime earnings gap and the motherhood lifetime penalty provide compelling evidence of the immense inequalities in the German labor market between the genders, and increasingly among women. While this twofold inequality is certainly unjust, it is also associated with a macroeconomic inefficiency that the German economy cannot afford, especially given the realities of demographic change and the persistent shortage of skilled labor. If women – and especially mothers – generate only about half the lifetime earnings possible for men, despite being in no way inferior in terms of performance or education, a significant part of the country's labor force potential will not be exploited to its fullest.

Policymakers can draw on a multifaceted array of options in seeking to not only curb but also reduce this twofold inequality. These options range from measures making it easier to reconcile family life and work (in part through an uncompromising expansion of care institutions), over a reform of the income splitting rule for married couples and the mini-job regulations, to providing essential workers with better pay and stronger collective-bargaining coverage.

Especially in the era of the coronavirus crisis, it is clearly important that policymakers create conditions able to counteract the trends outlined here. Society – and women and mothers least of all – cannot afford a “retraditionalization” of gender roles.

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