

**International and National Studies of the  
Transition to Parenthood**

*TransParent*

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## **Abstract**

This project studies how dual earner heterosexual couples negotiate and decide about the division of paid and unpaid work in the household, and how these processes and outcomes differ across welfare regimes. We combine currently available quantitative data on the division of paid and unpaid work, with a qualitative longitudinal approach, focusing on dual-earner couples who are having their first child. The change in the division of work around the time of first birth is crucial for gender inequality in the household. It also has long-term consequences for gender inequalities in the labour market (e.g. Mandel and Semyonov 2005; Ruhm 1998). Quantitative analyses of gendered employment transitions are used to identify national patterns of earning and caring around first birth, and to compare them cross-nationally, with specific focus on the role of national institutions. With the quantitative data, we can also verify and generalize the findings from the qualitative study as well as extend the analysis in place – over welfare regimes – and time. The qualitative data will show how individuals subjectively frame conditions and decisions in various contexts and indicate the degree to which different theories such as the doing gender approach, the relative resource/bargaining perspective and specialization strategies (translated into various arguments used in the negotiation process in the household) may influence different decisions in different institutional settings.

This international research project includes Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands. These countries symbolize different welfare state regimes where Germany and the Netherlands symbolise the conservative and Sweden the social-democratic welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990; 1999). After a more detailed description of the project, we will present some preliminary findings from the German qualitative part. In addition, we will present results from a quantitative event history study of career related consequences of women's time out on family leave for Germany, Sweden, and the U.S. (Aisenbrey, Evertsson & Grunow, forthcoming).

## **Background**

The gender equality ideal is widely spread in Sweden and increasingly so also in Germany and the Netherlands (Lück 2006). Developments like these are in line with sociological theories emphasizing increased individualization, individual choice and equity (cf. Giddens 1991), and the replacement of the gender-divided nuclear family by the ‘negotiated family’, where couples, rather than following fixed norms, negotiate their way to its form and content (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). However, empirical research also points to the reproduction of gender in families, indicating that the aforementioned theories underestimate structural conditions and their effects on actions (Ahlberg, Roman and Duncan 2008). For example, women still devote on average much more time to child care and housework than do men (e.g. Evertsson and Neramo 2004, Grunow et al. 2007, Devreux 2007). This is particularly true for families with small children. Even though Swedish men have increased their share of the parental leave days over time, only 2.5 percent of all eight-year-olds had parents who shared the parental leave equally (i.e. within the 40/60 interval) in 2005 (Försäkringskassan Statistik 2005:1). With the recent introduction of the so-called daddy-months in Germany, father's uptake of leave jumped up (to 10.5 percent), but uptake rates vary greatly across regions, and the vast majority of leave is still used by mothers (German Federal Statistical Office 2008). Over the last couple of years, Dutch father's participation in leave strongly increased. Still, 80 percent of fathers entitled to leave do not claim any (Statistics Netherlands 2005). Gender differences in paid work are also significant. Whereas full-time work has been a typical pattern for men throughout the post-war period, women with small children work part-time much more often than men do. Some women don't want to work full-time. Spending time with your child is of course very often an enjoyable experience and some may even be reluctant to share the parental leave period with their spouse. However, the resulting gendered paid and unpaid work pattern reproduces gender inequality in the home and in the labour market. It contributes to statistical discrimination against women and to horizontal and vertical gender segregation in the labour market (e.g. Ruhm 1998). It also makes women more financially vulnerable in case of a divorce. Hence, seen in this perspective, a better understanding of the mechanisms that produce the gendered pattern of work in different institutional contexts is important. So is an understanding of the mechanisms that work in the opposite direction and reduces gender traditional work patterns.

Our study is organized as an international cooperation, including the Netherlands, Germany, the U.S., and Sweden, where closely comparable data are gathered and analyzed.

These countries symbolize different welfare regimes where the Netherlands and Germany have been classified as conservative welfare states, the U.S. as liberal, and Sweden as a social democratic welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1999). The degree of de-familialism differs considerably between the countries (Orloff 1993; Esping-Andersen 1999). By a different terminology, they represent nations promoting a caregiver-parity strategy (the Netherlands and Germany), a universal-breadwinner strategy (the U.S.), and an earner-carer strategy (Sweden) (Sainsbury 1999). Historically, the Netherlands and Germany both displayed a very traditional division of labour between husbands and wives. However, in recent decades key institutional differences emerged for instance in taxation. Most importantly, the Dutch parental-leave system nowadays encourages part-time leave taking and continuous employment for parents, while German laws envision extended phases of employment-interruption and limited part-time work (BMFSFJ 2008; SZW 2008). As a result, barriers to father's leave taking are probably lower in the Netherlands than in Germany, where claiming parental-leave usually means absence from the job for several months or years. The liberal institutional system of the U.S. fostered a rapid decline of female homemaking, already in the 1960s-1970s (Grunow, Hofmeister, Buchholz 2006). Because leave coverage is low, usually both parents stay in full-time employment during the transition to parenthood. Still, women carry the main burden of housework and care (Hochschild 1989; Evertsson, Neramo 2004). A skewed division of labour and parental-leave taking is still dominant also in Sweden, although on a lower level than in the other countries. Still, the fact that the gender divide persists even in Scandinavia, in spite of its comparatively long tradition of female employment and extensive welfare state services in support of care-work, raises concerns as to which extent gender-identities and norms are more important than institutional support or financial decision-making when it comes to dividing the leave taking and the unpaid work (Evertsson/Neramo 2004; Grunow 2006).

Theoretical concepts such as 'doing gender' are hard to operationalize and test in large-scale-data analyses and partly as a consequence, these concepts have often been used as 'catch all' terms for otherwise unexplained variance in statistical models of the gendered division of labour. We aim to study these concepts partly through qualitative interviews. This should give us a better understanding of how parents discuss and agree on how to share paid and unpaid work and if, how, and to what extent gender is reproduced in the process. The insights we gain by combining qualitative interviews with quantitative data and methods and by framing the outcome in an international comparative context, will contribute to research fields such as

the household division of labour, gender inequality in the labour market and gender constructivism. With a qualitative approach, we are better able to assess assumptions that quantitative researchers have had to make in the absence of more thorough, in-depth going data (cf. Nordenmark och Nyman 2003), and with the quantitative data, we are able to verify and generalize some of the findings from the qualitative study as well as extend the analysis in time.

### **The qualitative studies**

In the *TransParent* project, we interview nascent parents, (a) a few months before the expected birth of their first child and, (b) about one and a half years after the birth. The initial guidelines for the interviews were developed, tested and applied in Germany at the State Institute for Family Research at the University of Bamberg (ifb). Project leader was Prof. Hans-Peter Blossfeld and Dr. Marina Rupp in collaboration with Dr. Daniela Grunow (see ifb for a description of the German project). The German qualitative data has already been collected (first interviews in 2006 and the follow up in 2007) and in Sweden, the first round of interviews are currently taking place. For the Netherlands, qualitative data which meet the methodological requirements for studying the theoretical mechanisms outlined above already exist. The Dutch Mini-Panel (31 couples, cp. Wiesman et al.) has been collected as part of the Netherlands-Kinship-Panel-Study NKPS (Dykstra et al. 1999). The sample of couples was recruited from the quantitative NKPS, from two midwife clinics, and from two antenatal classes in the Netherlands.

The interview guidelines are life-course oriented and try to get at the relevance of different sociological theories by posing open questions about the respondent and the couple's motives for different key decisions, actions and plans. The interviews take up issues such as the couple's present everyday life, daily routines (incl. housework routines), economic situation and employment situation, and the respondent's evaluation of these aspects. Respondents are asked to give an account of their career aspirations and life plans, as well as what steps the couple has taken in order to prepare for the time after birth (in terms of planned daily routines, the father's and mother's anticipated roles in reconciling work and parenthood, anticipated timing and phases of parental leave for each spouse, etc.). An important ingredient in the latter process is getting information on decision-making processes and how the couple deal with ambiguity and dissent (1) internally as a couple, (2) externally, in relation to family, friends, employers and relevant others. To what extent is gender and the 'proper behaviour' of

fathers and mothers something that works as a fall-back or default option when other factors (such as income, work situation and the like) discriminate little between the woman and the man? And to what extent do parents have to justify and explain their reasoning to others when they act in gender-atypical ways?

Hence, the first wave of interviews is aimed at learning more about how the couple negotiates and discusses the period to come, what the rationale for their plans (or diverse standpoints) are, as well as how they feel about this. The follow up is important in order to evaluate the extent to which the plans made before the birth have come true and if they have not, what the interfering factors have been and how the actors feel about, explain and justify the (new) outcome.

### **The quantitative part**

In order to test and confirm hypotheses raised from the qualitative interviews in different regimes, not least regarding the impact of institutional setting, cultural context and the like, we need large scale quantitative comparative data. Large scale quantitative data can also be used to initially describe and analyse different patterns of behaviour in different contexts. With these data, we are able to study long-term consequences of the division of labour around child birth and the coupled careers of the spouses. Potential useful data set in this context are the International Social Survey Program (ISSP), or country specific but comparable data sets such as the German Life History Study (GLHS) for Germany, the Netherlands-Kinship-Panel-Study NKPS (Dykstra et al. 1999), and the Swedish Level of Living Survey (LNU) for Sweden. In the following section, we will present results from a comparative study utilizing the German and Swedish data sets, as well as the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) for the U.S. (Aisenbrey, Evertsson and Grunow, forthcoming).

### **“Is there a career penalty for mothers’ time out? Germany, Sweden and the U.S. compared”. A brief summary of a quantitative event history study.**

In the article with the above title, we analyze the length of mothers’ time out of paid work after childbirth and its short-term career consequences for mothers’ in Germany, Sweden and the U.S. The article is written in collaboration with Silke Aisenbrey (Yeshiva University, New York) (Aisenbrey, Evertsson and Grunow, forthcoming). By using data from three countries, we analyze how different types of welfare states produce and institutionalize different patterns of return to the labor market for mothers and how these structures shape the subsequent career

trajectories of women. How do family leave policies in these countries work with regard to (a) fostering mothers' labor market attachment and (b) buffering the negative employment consequences resulting from mothers' time out? Are mothers punished for long time out periods, and are there between-country differences in mothers' subsequent career paths? We first explore how long women in the different institutional contexts interrupt employment after the birth of a child. Second, we examine their prospects upon return; do mothers return to a job similar to the one they had before the break, or are they more likely to experience, for instance, a downward occupational move? Finally, we assess whether the time women spend away from work after childbirth affects their subsequent career in terms of their probability of experiencing a positive or negative job change. Occupational changes – i.e. upward and downward occupational moves – are indicated by changes in occupational prestige (see Ganzeboom and Treiman 1996; Treiman 1977).

Figure 1 shows a descriptive survival analysis of the time it takes women to return to the labor market after their first child is born in Germany, Sweden and the U.S. We note vast differences between the countries. In the U.S., 40 percent of all mothers do not leave the labor market at all after the birth of their first child and after 3 months, 65 percent are back at work. The picture is very different for Germany where the great majority of mothers take an extended period of leave. After 12 months, only 30 percent are back at work, and after three years, about 50 percent have returned. In Sweden, somewhat more than 25 percent of women are back after two years, and about 50 percent after three years. Many women who stay out for longer periods have a second child within the same time-out period.

When we focus on the return to the labor market after a time out, we find a homogenous picture with reference to the types of reentries into paid employment after childbirth: Most women return to the same job or a job of similar prestige as the one held before the leave. Women who return to the same (or a similar) job also return faster than those returning to a job of higher or lower prestige. Once back on the job again, women in our three countries face very different career prospects partly depending on the accumulated earlier time spent on family leave. For American mothers, any previous time out is costly. Women who reenter the labor market between 4 and 12 months after the birth of a child have a 15 percent lower chance of making an upward move compared to the group that stays out for less than 4 months. For those reentering after a year, the chances of an upward move are even lower. What matters for downward moves is whether women left the labor market at all. Staying in the labor market with no interruptions lowers the chances of a downward move by 16 percent.

For Germany, women are more likely to make either an upward or a downward move the longer their accumulated earlier time out on family leave. Hence, a period of leave seem to destabilize German women's careers. For Sweden, we find a significant negative effect on upward moves of previous child-related career breaks longer than 16 months. Hence, women who return to the labor market before the child turns 17 months have better career prospects than do those returning later (Aisenbrey, Evertsson and Grunow, forthcoming).

As the presented study shows, internationally comparative quantitative studies can tell us a great deal about how women's lives and work careers are shaped by different social policy regimes and labor market contexts. Although some of these differences can be attributed to employers and their actions, some can no doubt also be traced to the different desires of women and men in each of these contexts. As an example, preliminary analyses of ISSP data show that in Sweden, less than 30 percent agree with the statement that a pre-school child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works compared to slightly more than 40 percent in the U.S. and 70 percent in West Germany. Still, about 70 percent in all three countries agree that a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her child as a mother who does not work. So how do couples reason and act when they are about to face a life-encompassing event such as becoming a parent? What are the restrictions within which they act and what do they think of the observed outcome, i.e. the way the division of care, unpaid and paid work is divided between the spouses? To get closer to an answer to these questions, we turn to the first tentative results from the German qualitative study.

### **Preliminary results from the German qualitative study**

#### ***The power of norms***

We found the role of gendered parenting norms to be essential with regard to whether and how long the woman (or the man) anticipated becoming a full-time homemaker after the birth of the child. Norms also played a role concerning the question whether daycare would be considered an option for the newborn. The legal parental leave regulations in Germany were known to all respondents and were clearly perceived as a central normative point of reference.<sup>1</sup> Only one couple (dual-career, both working for the same employer) decided not to

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<sup>1</sup> German family leave policies consist of two major instruments: maternity leave and parental leave. Maternity leave has a long tradition (since 1952) and assures women a leave of six weeks before and eight weeks after childbirth with sick pay. In 1986, the first parental leave was introduced and its initial duration (10 months) was extended several times to a maximum of three years per child from

claim any leave, because the employer had clearly signaled that he would dismiss the mother as soon as possible if she did. The employer also refused to reduce her working time to part-time. For that same reason, it was not an option that the father took any leave. As a result, putting the baby into day-care after maternity leave, was the only alternative. The two quotes below are from the father-to-be.

*M: Concerning giving the child away [putting the baby in full-time daycare], we had several discussions with family members. [...] This made us wonder "Can we do this? Do we want to do this?" (Int 122 01:10, translation)*

The couple then talked about their doubts to the director of the daycare institution, and was reassured:

*M: "Because we're apparently not the only ones who do this. It's a common model, nothing unusual." (Int 122 01:12, translation)*

In this case, the normative views of relevant others; the family, the director of the crèche, and the behavior of other parents who put their baby in daycare, are apparently perceived as central points of reference concerning the question whether daycare is an option for this couple.

In another couple, the female partner was the sole-breadwinner while the male partner was only marginally employed, trying to finish his PhD thesis. This couple envisioned that the husband would become the main caregiver while finishing his thesis. At the time of the interview, the couple was deeply troubled by the degree to which others (predominantly her colleagues and some acquaintances) objected to their plans. Even though, financially, there seemed to be no other feasible option, the mother was judged for not planning to take any leave. The couple had expected much more tolerance regarding their decision. Interestingly,

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1992 onwards. Mothers – and also fathers – on leave have a legal claim to return to the same (or similar) job with their previous employer and are entitled to a – moderate – compensation ‘wage’ during the leave period. Since 1992 parents may alternate in taking paid leave, up to three times (§ 16, 1 BErzGG). Until 2007, parents on leave were entitled to a monthly payment of 300 Euro, limited to two years per child, with eligibility based on household income and individual work hours. This corresponds to a net weekly benefit of 16 percent of an average production worker’s wage in the year 2000 (Ferrarini 2006). For children born January 1, 2007 onwards, a new regulation limits the period for financial compensation during parental leave to a maximum of 14 months, where the last two months are conditional on both parents sharing the leave. The interviews took place in spring/summer 2006. Therefore the period from 2007 onwards is not represented in our data.

as our data from wave two show, the couple ended up *not* realizing their initial plans. Instead, the father accepted a job in a different city and commuted long-distance, while the mother was on part-time leave, freelancing part-time, sharing the caring with her sister and mother, who lived next door, after the couple's move to the country side.

For all other couples, the main difference in 'progressiveness' with regard to gendered caregiver and provider roles was in the length of leave the mother planned to take, with the legal maximum of three years being perceived as the maximum duration in non-employment imaginable. As can be seen from the quantitative data presented in Figure 1, the anticipated maximum length of time out of three years is much shorter than the actual time out experienced by one out of three German mothers.

We found interesting social class differences in the level of reflexivity concerning motherhood norms. Career-couples' reports<sup>2</sup> reflected a high level of self-reflexiveness in this respect – they typically reported to have discussed different alternatives of role-division and of earner-carer arrangements at length. They also reported to have consulted websites and books. So even though the final result (with the two exceptions mentioned above) favored and justified a traditional pattern of female full-time care giving and male breadwinning, this decision was presented in the interviews as being the result of some unique circumstances, or as a consequence of breastfeeding, as we illustrate in a later quote.

*W: “Yes, well, I – since we’ve had these problems [to conceive] I now want to take advantage of the time with the child. I will therefore claim the full maternity leave, the three years.” (Int HS6.1 00:30:01, translation)*

For most of the working-class couples, in contrast, the traditional female-homemaker model was usually considered the ideal. Since the traditional pattern was so much taken for granted by these respondents, they apparently found it difficult to articulate their normative beliefs about motherhood in more detail. They were simply convinced that for the mother to stay home with the baby was the best –or the one and only– option for the baby. This is illustrated in the following quotes, the first one from a working class mother-to-be, the second one from a working class father-to-be:

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<sup>2</sup> Career-couples are defined here as university-educated couples where both hold jobs that match their education. Working class couples are defined as couples with lower or medium-level secondary education with or without apprenticeship where both work in manual occupations.

*W: "I always wanted to stay at home completely, then. For the baby." (Int HS9.1 00:25:00, translation)*

*M: "Well, I personally would have preferred her [his wife] staying at home for three years."*

*[Interviewer: "Why?"]*

*M: "Well, I'm still of the opinion that a child should be surrounded by his parents during the first years; not by a nanny already after one year. This is the main reason." (Int HS2.2 00:25:39, translation)*

As the quote above illustrates, working-class couples reflected about alternative care-giver arrangements mainly because the female income was essential to support the family in the long run. This limited the couples' ability to use the maximum leave-length available and these financial considerations forced the couple to compromise on their actual preferences. The cross-national comparison will be illuminating here with respect to how the taken-for-granted motherhood norms differ across countries. It will for instance show whether Dutch and Swedish parents take their respective legal leave lengths as the implicit normative point of reference for how long a leave should be, or whether extended full-time female homemaking is considered the ideal.

The view that the baby is 'naturally' going to be more 'hers' than 'his,' is, as already indicated above, another common pattern we found among the couples we interviewed. Especially the men and women in the dual-career couples reported deep reflections about the importance of breastfeeding, thereby assuming that breastfeeding would be incompatible with the mother's paid work. The following quote stems from a pregnant woman:

*W: "Having read and informed myself it became clear that I actually have to do it [breastfeeding]. That it is very important for my child's health and that I, as a person, cannot oppose to it since I actually have to give the best for my child. (...) But finally I decided to do it, because of the support I have; and what I actually wanted to mention is that /ehm/ I wanted to stay home in the beginning, but what I always had in mind, given I would return back to work right after the 8 weeks of maternity leave; as a breastfeeding mom this would be completely impossible." (Int 011b 00:16:39; translation).*

Her partner adds in this context:

*M: "She also doesn't want to give the three years away." (Int 012 00:28:04; translation)*

Another female interview partner explains:

*W: "Hm, yes, sure I could imagine the child's father, M(Name) staying at home; but ... I would be a bit jealous. He'd be capable of it, I believe." (Int HS7.1 00:23:15; translation).*

The latter statement also indicates that the woman's decision regarding her carer-role is not based on the father's perceived lack of competencies as a caregiver. Also, to some extent, the importance of breastfeeding is used as a way to justify the mother's extended period of full time care giving way beyond the normal breast feeding phase. This is interesting, and again hints to normative ideas about motherhood, because only a minority of German mothers breastfeed exclusively longer than a few months. While 90 percent breastfeed directly after giving birth, merely 22% breastfeed exclusively during the first six months after childbirth (Arbeitskreis Frauengesundheit 2008). The idea that breastfeeding and mother's paid work are incompatible is not supported by the data. Statistics indicate that a large share of stay-at-home moms don't breastfeed at all, or at least not exclusively.

### ***Towards a non-monetary theory of the family?***

The preliminary analyses of the qualitative data presented here further explore the role of relative resource-bargaining and specialization on the couple's division of labor. Previous quantitative studies have found indications of increasing traditionalization of gender roles among couples as the relationship develops and especially following the transition to parenthood, when the volume of reproductive work increases (Grunow et al. 2007). In fact, this pattern is even apparent among some couples with non-traditional matches of labor market resources and an initially egalitarian division of roles, challenging the body of economic theories on the gendered division of labor. Therefore, in this study, we find a special interest in non-traditional matches of couples (dual-career and female-provider couples). From an economic point of view, these couples are the ones – if any – for whom the division of labor should deviate from traditional patterns and it is especially interesting to look into the ways these couples distribute the paid and unpaid work and the reasons for their decisions.

Our findings indicate that couples negotiate about their respective contributions to paid and unpaid work. However, especially for those with financial resource-equity, the 'currency'

does not seem to be earnings or earnings potential. Rather, the couples reported negotiating about their mutual contributions in terms of perceived fairness.

*M: "It is not so important that each of us does exactly the same chores but it should definitely be balanced." (Int HS7.2 00:12:59:00; translation)*

*M: "We negotiate this over and over again. ...My tolerance level is higher (Int HS 072: 17:00; translation). [...] Problem: It is also really difficult to compare [the different tasks] – How much is a load of laundry worth? (Int HS 072: 19:00; translation).*

Both statements were used by men to describe how the couple decides about the division of housework. Respondents emphasize equity based on the scope or significance of their contributions. The monetary contributions were not mentioned in this context at all. On the other hand, in couples where the male partner was the main earner, this was put forward by both spouses to justify more a traditional division of housework.

A second non-economic bargaining pattern could be detected where one partner (in this case the woman) was the one who *wanted* to have a child while the father-to-be merely went along with her. In this case, both partners had similar jobs and similar earnings. Still, as a consequence of her wanting the child more, they agreed that care giving would be her major obligation (071).

Finally, against the background of the emphasis put on economic aspects by both resource bargaining theory and by Becker's economic theory of the family, we were surprised by the couples' lack of references to money to some extent. First of all, especially among the career-couples, we found that key financial issues remained unsolved, prior to the birth of the child. For example, in one of our dual-career couples, both partners had purposefully maintained their own bank accounts and money. Expenses were shared. However, the mother-to-be was already on maternity leave and planned to stay home with the baby for an extended period of time. So there was an urgent need for a rearranging of the couple's finances, for providing common access to bank accounts etc.

*W: "But now we have to do something, since I will not receive much money anymore... but yet, nothing is settled although I'm close to giving birth." (Int HS2.1 00:45:00 ) [ She laughs and changes the topic by switching back to the past.]*

It seemed it was in the interview-situation that this woman first thought about their money as

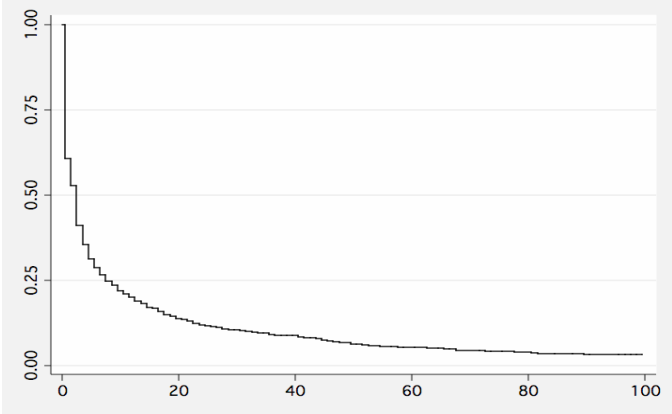
a practical matter. The men we interviewed, both of higher and lower social classes, were clearly more reflexive and aware of the long-term financial situation than their female partners. Several of them mentioned the future loss of income due to the mother's leave-taking and declared a preference for shorter leaves and quicker returns to work for their partners. This view is not at all in line with either the resource-bargaining perspective or the specialization theory, as suggested by the economic theory of the family. Instead, it is the common financial need of the family that is in focus and to some extent, this may mean having to give up on (not seldom traditional) ideals about the division of work.

### **Conclusions**

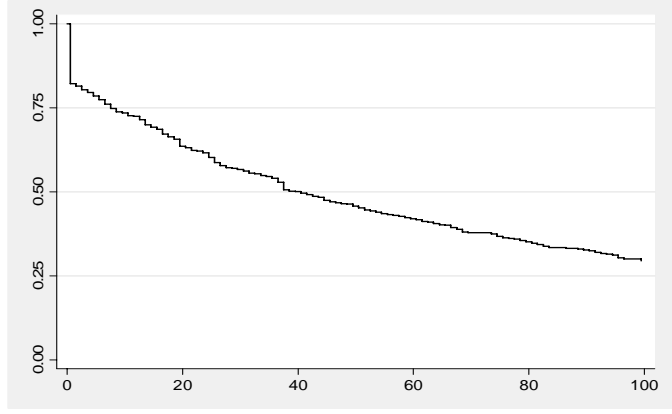
The qualitative findings for Germany only gives us a few tentative insights into couple's decision making processes around the birth of their first child. As the findings partly goes against dominant theories about household-bargaining and specialization (though in line with the quantitative longitudinal patterns observed), the evidence from the other countries will be illuminating; how universal are the micro-processes and mechanisms, which we observed in the German couples? Can we find the same patterns also in other countries? Also, by extending our analyses to other countries, we hope to gain more insight into how to modify and extend the micro-theoretical framework of household decision making and gender, so that it becomes more useful for explaining the choices made by current and coming generations of parents in the developed countries.

**Figure 1. Kaplan-Meier survival curves of mothers in time out after first birth (at a given month since birth)**

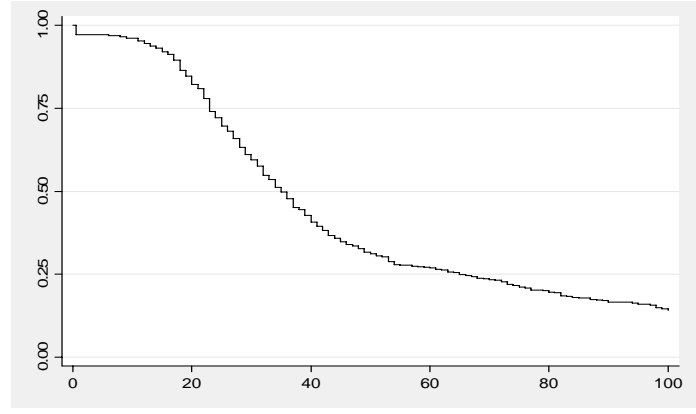
U.S.



Germany



Sweden



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