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## Should Mama or Papa Work?\*

### Variations in Attitudes towards Parental Employment by Country of Origin and Child Age

Ludovica Gambaro, C. Katharina Spiess, Katharina Wrohlich,  
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**Abstract:** Employment among mothers has been rising in recent decades, although mothers of young children often work fewer hours than other women do. Parallel to this trend, approval of maternal employment has increased, albeit not evenly across groups. However, differences in attitudes remain unexplored despite their importance for better understanding mothers' labour market behaviour. Meanwhile, the employment of fathers has remained stable and attitudes towards paternal employment do not differ as much as attitudes towards maternal employment do between socio-economic groups. This paper examines attitudes towards maternal and paternal employment. It focuses on Germany, drawing on data from the German Family Demography Panel Study (FReDA). The survey explicitly asks whether mothers and fathers should be in paid work, work part-time or full-time, presenting respondents with fictional family profiles that vary the youngest child's age. Unlike previous studies, the analysis compares the views of respondents with different origins: West Germany, East Germany, immigrants from different world regions, and second-generation migrants in West Germany.

The results highlight remarkable differences between respondents from West and East Germany, with the former group displaying strong approval for part-time employment among mothers and fathers of very young children and the latter group reporting higher approval for full-time employment. Immigrant groups are far from homogenous, holding different attitudes depending on their region of origin. Taken together, the results offer a nuanced picture of attitudes towards maternal and paternal employment. We discuss these findings in relation to labour markets participation in Germany.

**Keywords:** Gender attitudes · Maternal employment · Paternal employment · East and West Germany · Migration background

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## 1 Introduction

Since 2000, maternal employment rates have been rising in Germany, as in many other European countries. In 2020, 75 percent of mothers of children under age 18 were in employment. Despite this upward trend, average working hours have been declining, with two-thirds of mothers working part-time; compared to only 35 percent of all women without children doing so (*Federal Statistical Office 2022*). Even among mothers there is considerable heterogeneity in employment patterns by youngest child age, socio-economic characteristics, and region. For example, part-time employment is more prevalent among mothers in West Germany than in East Germany (e.g., *Barth et al. 2020*). There are also considerable differences by migrant status and background: 53 percent of all mothers with a migration background and with children below the age of 18 are employed, compared to 76 percent of mothers without a migration background (*BMFSFJ 2020*).<sup>1</sup> While the reasons for these different employment patterns among mothers are complex and manifold, variation in attitudes toward maternal employment has been shown to play a major role (e.g., *Blau et al. 2020*).

Paternal employment, on the other hand, has seen little variation over time in Germany and elsewhere. The only exception is the rate of fathers taking parental leave, which has increased rapidly since the policy reform of 2007. However, this is only a small change in employment patterns, given that the average father only takes the two additional partner months and does not interrupt his employment for longer time periods. Part-time employment among fathers remains rare (e.g., *Samtleben et al. 2019; Brehm et al. 2022*). Given these rather stable patterns, attitudes towards paternal employment are rarely investigated; if so, they are analysed in combination with attitudes towards maternal employment (*Jacobs/Gerson 2016; Panova/Buber-Ennser 2016*).

Cultural norms surrounding gender roles affect economic decisions such as labour supply and the division of care work within the household and, thus, are an important driver of gender gaps in the labour market.<sup>2</sup> Cultural norms and attitudes toward employment of mothers and fathers vary substantially not only between countries, but also between different socio-economic groups within countries. For example, several studies show that migrants from different countries of origin differ strongly in their views on gender roles (e.g., *Pessin/Arpino 2018; Kavli 2015*). In the case of Germany, large differences in attitudes toward gender roles also persist between East and West Germany, hinting at the long-lasting effects of institutions and policies on cultural norms that reflect these attitudes (see, among others, *Beblo/Görges 2018; Jessen 2022; Lippmann et al. 2020*).

<sup>1</sup> Here the term “person with migration background” refers to the official definition: “A person has a migration background if s/he or at least one of his/her parents did not acquire the German citizenship at birth” (*Statistisches Bundesamt 2017*).

<sup>2</sup> For Germany, see *Lietzmann/Frodermann (2021)*. *Giuliano (2020)* provides a comprehensive overview of the literature on the effect of cultural norms on gender gaps in economic outcomes from different countries.

In this paper, we investigate attitudes toward the employment of mothers and fathers in Germany for native Germans and migrants based on data from the first wave of FReDA – the German Family Demography Panel Study, collected in 2021. In particular, we separately analyse these attitudes for native Germans in East and West Germany as well as for migrants from different countries of origin. Importantly, we can analyse these attitudes in detail by age of the youngest child and can differentiate between part-time and full-time employment.

Among migrants, attitudes toward the employment of women in general (*Pessin/Arpino* 2018) as well as the employment of mothers with young children (*Kavli* 2015) differ strongly by country of origin and are highly correlated with cultural norms in the countries of origin. But migrants also differ by the duration of their residence in the host country: a study from Norway, for example, shows that second-generation immigrants largely adopt the attitudes of Norwegian natives toward maternal employment (*Kitterod/Nadim* 2020). For Germany, several studies show that even more than three decades after reunification, there are still noticeable differences in the attitudes toward maternal employment between East and West Germany, among both men and women (e.g., *Barth et al.* 2020). These attitudes are influenced by differences in the institutional frameworks for combining work and family life, such as day care or all-day schooling (e.g., *Zoch/Schober* 2018). In East Germany, where social policies during the German Democratic Republic required and supported women's employment, there are still more day care slots for children starting at age two and more afternoon care programs for elementary school children than in West Germany (*Autor:innengruppe Bildungsberichterstattung* 2020). Another reason for differences in attitudes toward maternal employment might be related to intergenerational links in gender attitudes or own experiences with working mothers (e.g. *Schmitz/Spiess* 2021).

In this paper, we take advantage of how FReDA surveys attitudes towards maternal employment. Beside using questions designed more than thirty years ago (*Halimi et al.* 2018), FReDA includes more detailed and differentiated questions that better reflect contemporary views on how parents should reconcile family responsibilities and paid employment, allowing for a more complete and insightful picture than other surveys. Drawing on these more precise survey questions, we contribute to the existing literature in several ways. First, we describe and compare attitudes toward maternal employment for mothers of children of different age groups. While most research focuses on the employment of mothers of children at age two, our analysis can differentiate attitudes toward maternal employment by child age, ranging from age two through 18. Second, we focus on attitudes toward maternal employment for natives of East and West Germany as well as for immigrants from different countries of origin. Moreover, we differentiate between full- and part-time employment. Third, we complement these analyses with the description of attitudes toward the employment of fathers. In sum, we take a more comprehensive look at the attitudes toward more or less egalitarian family models.

Our results corroborate previous findings by showing persisting differences in the attitudes toward maternal employment between East and West Germany. These differences are most pronounced for children aged two. Moreover, acceptance of

full-time employment of mothers is much higher in East than in West Germany. Among migrants, we find significant differences by country of origin: while the attitudes toward maternal employment of immigrants from Western countries range between those of natives in East and West Germany, immigrants from Eastern European countries as well as from Asia and Africa (including Turkey) have more traditional views, especially for mothers of young children. The views of second-generation immigrants range between those of first-generation immigrants from Asia and Africa and those of West German natives.

As for attitudes toward fathers, we find that part-time employment when children are very young is more accepted in West Germany than in East Germany. Among all investigated groups, acceptance of fathers with young children working part-time is highest among immigrants from Western countries, followed by German natives and second-generation immigrants. Immigrants from Eastern European countries, Asia, and Africa show the lowest support for paternal part-time employment.

## 2 Data

Our analysis uses the first wave of the data from the German Family Demography Panel Study (FReDA) (see the editorial by *Bujard, Hank and Pollak* in this special issue, *Bujard et al. 2023; Hank 2023; Schneider et al. 2021*). The recruitment survey was carried out between April and June 2021. The first interviews (Wave 1a) took place in July 2021, with the second wave (1b) occurring a few months later, between November 2021 and January 2022. FReDA surveyed 38,044 people, 7,586 of them with paper-based questionnaires, and 30,458 through self-administered online interviews. FReDA interviewed a nationally representative sample of people resident in Germany aged between 18 and 49 years. Partners of main respondents, when available, were also asked to participate in the survey, but in this study we only rely on responses by the target person. For our analysis the following details are important. FReDA's paper-based questionnaire, used by 20 percent of the sample, was only available in German. However, FReDA's invitation letter offered participants the option to respond to the web-based questionnaire in Turkish, Russian, or Arabic. Among those answering the web-based questionnaire, less than one percent used a non-German option. The sample of immigrants will therefore underrepresent those with lower German language proficiency, a point to which we will return when discussing the results.

### *Operationalisation of gender attitudes*

Participants in FReDA reported their gender role attitudes in their second interview (Wave 1b). FReDA includes a battery of standard gender role questions, making comparisons with other surveys rather straightforward. Given our focus on attitudes toward maternal employment, we start by using participants' agreement to the statement "A preschool child suffers if her or his mother works," with ratings measured on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly

agree). This question has been routinely used in surveys of attitudes towards maternal employment. In Germany, prominent examples are the German Family Panel pairfam (Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics), in which FReDA is partly rooted (Bujard *et al.* 2023) and the ALLBUS survey (*Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften*), which elicited attitudes towards maternal employment by using the statement “A young child will certainly suffer when his/her mother is in work” (for studies using this question based on ALLBUS, see e.g. Blohm/Walter 2018; Braun 2014; for the pairfam scales manual, see Thönnissen *et al.* 2018). The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) also used very similar phrasing in its “Family and Changing Gender Roles” module (ISSP 1994, 2002, 2012). As noted by Halimi *et al.* (2018), this type of instrument was designed decades ago, when mothers of young children were starting to enter the labour market, and surveys have kept using it to ensure consistency over time, missing out on more subtle attitudinal changes that may have occurred in the meantime.

One innovative feature of FReDA is that, beside the standard question, it surveys respondents’ attitudes in relation to maternal employment by asking: “Consider a family with a mother, father and 2 children where the youngest child is 2 years old. Should the mother...

- Work full-time, or
- Work part-time, or
- Not work at all?”

The sample was then randomly split into four groups and the same question was again asked, inserting different ages for the youngest child: 4, 8, 12, or 18 years. Thus, these are different hypothetical scenarios which have no relation to the respondents’ family situation and the presence of children of different ages in their home. These questions result in five three-fold categorical variables capturing whether mothers of 2-, 4-, 8-, 12-, and 18-year-olds should work full-time, part-time, or not at all.

A further innovative aspect of FReDA is that it also asked the same two questions in relation to paternal employment, eliciting views not only on what mothers should do, but also on how much fathers should work, again covering different age scenarios in the second question.

By combining the answers given for mothers and fathers, we are able to examine support for six different prevailing models of sharing paid work among parents: i) adult worker model: both mother and father should work full-time; ii) dual earner/dual carer model: both mother and father should work part-time; iii) one-and-a-half-earner model: father should work full-time and mother part-time; iv) one-and-a-half-carer model: father should work part-time and mother should not be in paid work; v) male breadwinner model: father should work full-time and mother should not be in paid work; vi) residual category, including support for all other possible combinations. Thus, besides examining attitudes towards maternal and paternal employment separately, we investigate what respondents believe to be the best combination at the household level.

It is important to remember that these gender attitudes were collected during the second year of the Covid-19 pandemic. There is evidence (e.g., Huebener *et al.*

2022) that gender attitudes among men became more egalitarian at the beginning of the pandemic, although this “effect” had largely faded by 2022. Thus, for the interpretation of the results one should keep in mind that these measures, at least among men, might have a slight “Covid bias.”

### *Operationalisation of Subgroups*

To map differences in attitudes across groups with different backgrounds, we employ the following six categories to define our subgroups. The rationale behind the definitions are the aforementioned differences in the regional infrastructure for combining work and family life, which influence attitudes and differences in the norms adults grew up with as children and adolescents. “East Germany” includes respondents born in federal states that were part of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). “West Germany” includes those born in federal states that were part of the Federal Republic of Germany, including West Berlin. Both groups only comprise respondents with at least one German parent. An alternative definition based on where in Germany respondents lived at the time of the survey was also used and produced almost identical results. “Western countries” indicates that the respondent was born in one of the following regions: Southern, Western or Northern Europe, North America, or Oceania. “Eastern Europe” includes all those born in an Eastern European country, the Balkan region and ex-Soviet countries in Central Asia, such as Kazakhstan. “Africa and Asia” comprises those born in the Middle East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, and all other Asian countries. Importantly, this group includes immigrants from Turkey. “Second-generation migrants” are respondents with two foreign parents; note that this group was born in West Germany, as we excluded a handful of cases of children of immigrants born in East Germany. Respondents born in Latin American countries were excluded from the analysis because there were too few to be investigated as a distinct group. Absent from our categorisation is the group that in Germany is officially classified as “with migration background”, which includes all those with at least one parent born without German citizenship (*Statistisches Bundesamt 2017*).

### *Analytical sample and empirical approach*

Our analytical samples include observations with valid answers to the questions on maternal and paternal employment. Participants in Wave 1b of FReDA who did not report their views on parents’ employment comprise approximately 5 percent of the overall sample and were less likely than respondents to have children. There were no other noticeable differences by origin, education, age, or employment status. We present the results by splitting the sample by gender, as women are often found to hold more egalitarian attitudes than men. Table S1 in the supplementary material details the sizes of the different subgroups.

Throughout the analyses we employ calibration weights provided with the data to adjust the data for different inclusion probabilities due to the survey sampling design and to reduce biases due to nonresponse. By using these weights, we



ensure that FReDA data are representative of persons aged 18-49 years resident in Germany (for more details, see *FReDA 2023*, Section 5).

We present our results graphically and report weighted probabilities, showing very similar results to the multivariate analyses included in the supplementary material.

### 3 Results

First, we examine attitudes toward maternal employment as captured by agreement with the statement “A pre-school child suffers if his or her mother works” (Fig. 1). This is the question relied upon by most existing studies of attitudes towards maternal employment, and we use it here to give readers a point of reference against which to judge the more nuanced attitudinal measures on which we base most of the subsequent analysis.

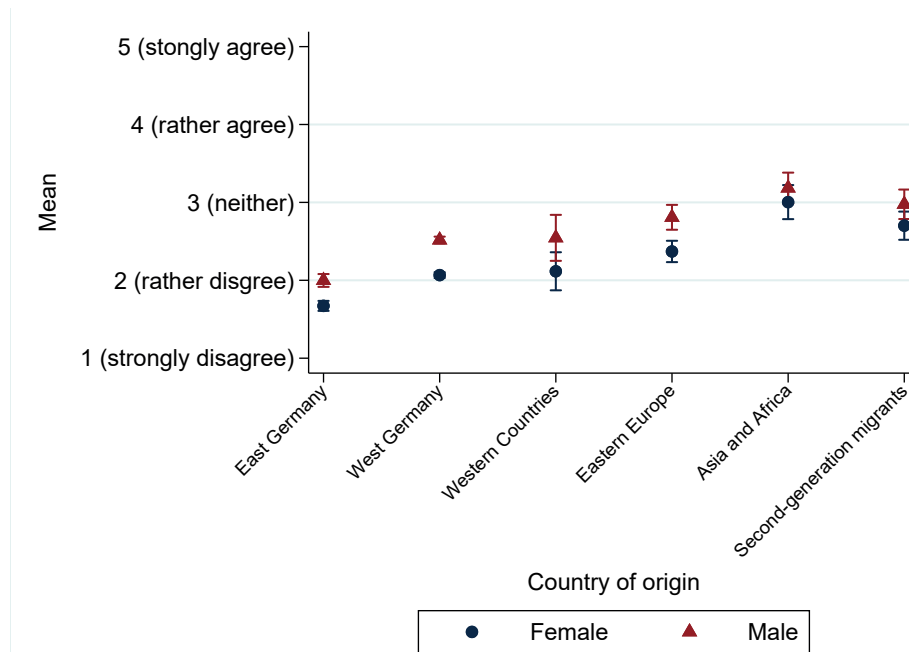
Values range from one to five, with higher values indicating stronger agreement. Two things stand out: First, gender is confirmed as an important determinant of attitudes toward maternal employment. Within all groups, men are more likely to agree with the statement than women. This is in line with previous findings, pointing to a higher level of traditionalism among men than among women (*Davis/Greenstein 2009*). The gender differences are substantial and statistically significant, with the exception of immigrants from Asia and Africa.

Second, the graph also shows clear differences in attitudes between groups, which hold equally for men and women. People from East Germany tend to disagree the most with the statement, reflecting the historical patterns of widespread integration of mothers into the labour market (e.g., *Rosenfeld et al. 2004*). Average attitudes among women from West Germany and Western countries are almost identical, as they both disagree with the statement. By contrast, men from West Germany and from Western countries hold more traditional views, which again are very similar to one another. In contrast to those living in East Germany, immigrants from Eastern European countries express slightly more traditional attitudes. While this may be surprising given that the dual-earner model was a universal feature of socialist states before 1989, it can be explained by the prevalence of immigrants from more traditional countries within the ex-socialist bloc, such as Poland (*Glass/Fodor 2007; Fodor/Balogh 2010*), but also ethnically German immigrants from Kazakhstan and Russia (*OECD 2017*). Responses from immigrants originating in Africa and Asia as well as second-generation immigrants in West Germany show the highest agreement with the statement that pre-school children suffer if mothers work; this is especially the case among men from these two subgroups.

A major problem in measuring attitudes with this item is that it is implicitly moulded on the “pure” male breadwinner model, which, although prevalent for several decades in many industrialised countries, is increasingly rare, as the majority of mothers in OECD countries now tend to be in waged work (*OECD 2020*). As patterns of employment among mothers vary greatly in their intensity and in relation to the age of the youngest child, attitudinal questions need to reflect this



**Fig. 1:** Pre-school child suffers if mother works, by respondent country of origin and gender



Note: The figure shows the gender attitudes for different countries of origin by gender. High values mean that a person agrees with the statement “A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works.” The vertical lines represent the 95% confidence intervals. Source: FReDA (2021), weighted, own calculations.

variety in order to be able to identify meaningful normative variations and to capture potential misalignments or differences across population groups, as we do here. As the next set of results illustrates, attitudes toward maternal employment are not monolithic, detached from differing children’s caring needs, or from employment demands. Rather, attitudes toward maternal employment are highly differentiated and require the more nuanced measures used in the rest of the analyses.

### 3.1 Attitudes toward maternal employment

Figures 2 and 3 report, for women and men respectively, attitudes toward maternal employment distinguishing across age of the youngest child along the horizontal axis and by the response options of full-time employment, part-time employment, or no employment altogether. Results are reported in separate panels for each of the six respondent groups. Each marker in the panel indicates the probability that a woman from a specific group, say West Germany, would state that mothers whose youngest child is either two, four, eight, twelve, or eighteen should work full-time, part-time

or not at all. The estimates obtained when controlling for additional characteristics such as age, education, employment status, and length of stay in Germany were very similar, suggesting little heterogeneity within groups. The results of these models are reported in Tables S2 and S3 in the Online Supplementary Material.

### *Women's attitudes*

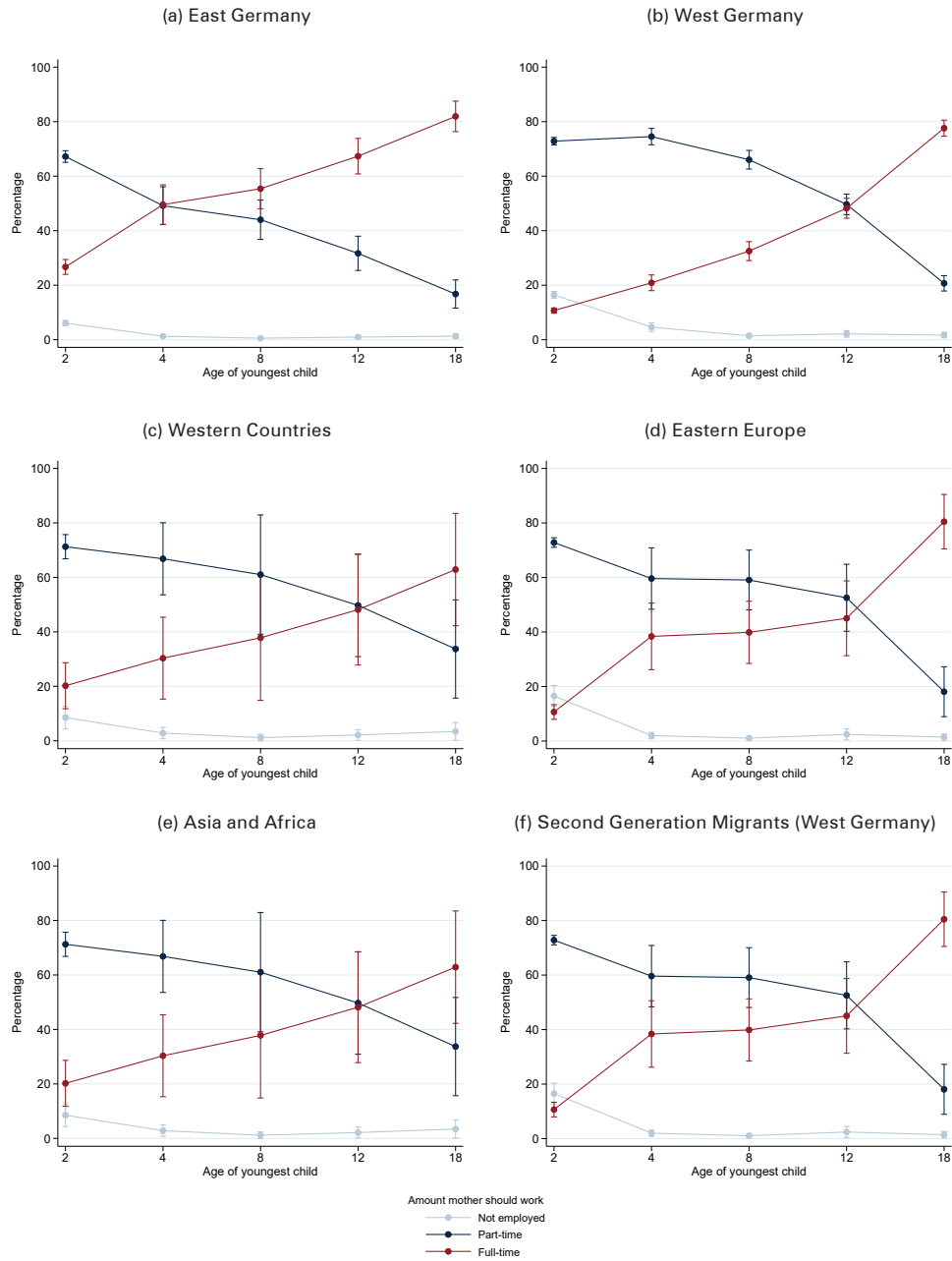
Starting from women's attitudes (Fig. 2), some broad commonalities across groups are immediately noticeable. First, within all groups, support for part-time employment is highest when the youngest child in the hypothetical scenario is two years old but declines as the child's age is increased. Whereas approximately 70 percent of women across all groups state that mothers of two-year-olds should work part-time, less than 40 percent say so of mothers of 18-year-olds. The mirror image of this downward trend is the increasing approval for full-time employment, which becomes the most supported working arrangement for mothers of 18-year-olds. The second commonality across groups is the relative unimportance of non-employment once the youngest child is four, with between 1 and 13 percent of female respondents affirming that mothers of four-year-olds should not be in employment.<sup>3</sup>

While these broad patterns are shared across all groups, there are also important differences. These concern, first, how much mothers should work when their youngest child is two. Although part-time employment is invariably and by far the preferred option, non-employment is supported by substantial proportions of women born in West Germany (whether from immigrant or native families), as well as by women from Eastern European countries, and from Asia and Africa, making it the second most upheld attitude within these groups with support ranging between 17 and 27 percent. Expressed support for full-time employment also varies across groups, as indicated by the different starting points of the dark lines in the six panels. Unsurprisingly, the highest support for full-time employment is found among women from East Germany, with 27 percent of them stating that mothers of two-year-olds should work full-time, followed by women from Western countries (20 percent). The result for women from East Germany is in line with the pattern of uninterrupted full-time employment even among mothers of young children that was prevalent in the GDR (*Rosenfeld et al. 2004; Hašková/Klenner 2010*).

The second important difference across groups has to do with how favourable attitudes towards part-time over full-time employment evolve with the age of the youngest child, which is captured by the slopes of the full-time and part-time employment lines. Here, the most striking contrast is the one between women from East Germany and those from West Germany. In East Germany, the sample is split equally into two: 50 percent indicate that mothers of four-year-olds should work full-time, and 49 percent indicate part-time. In contrast, in West Germany, the difference

<sup>3</sup> Women from Asia and Africa display a higher approval for non-employment for mothers of four-year-olds, but the estimate is fairly imprecise due to the small sample size.

**Fig. 2:** Attitudes towards maternal employment depending on the age of the youngest child, by respondent country of origin (women)



Note: The figures show the attitudes towards maternal employment depending on the age of the youngest child. The vertical lines represent the 95% confidence intervals.  
 Source: FReDA (2021), weighted, own calculations.

in support of these two employment options is vast, with 75 percent stating that mothers of four years olds should work part-time, and only 21 percent backing full-time employment. In West Germany, it is only when the youngest child is 12 that support for full-time and part-time employment equalise, reflecting a long-standing pattern with part-time employment as *the* way to meet care responsibilities while maintaining attachment to the labour market.

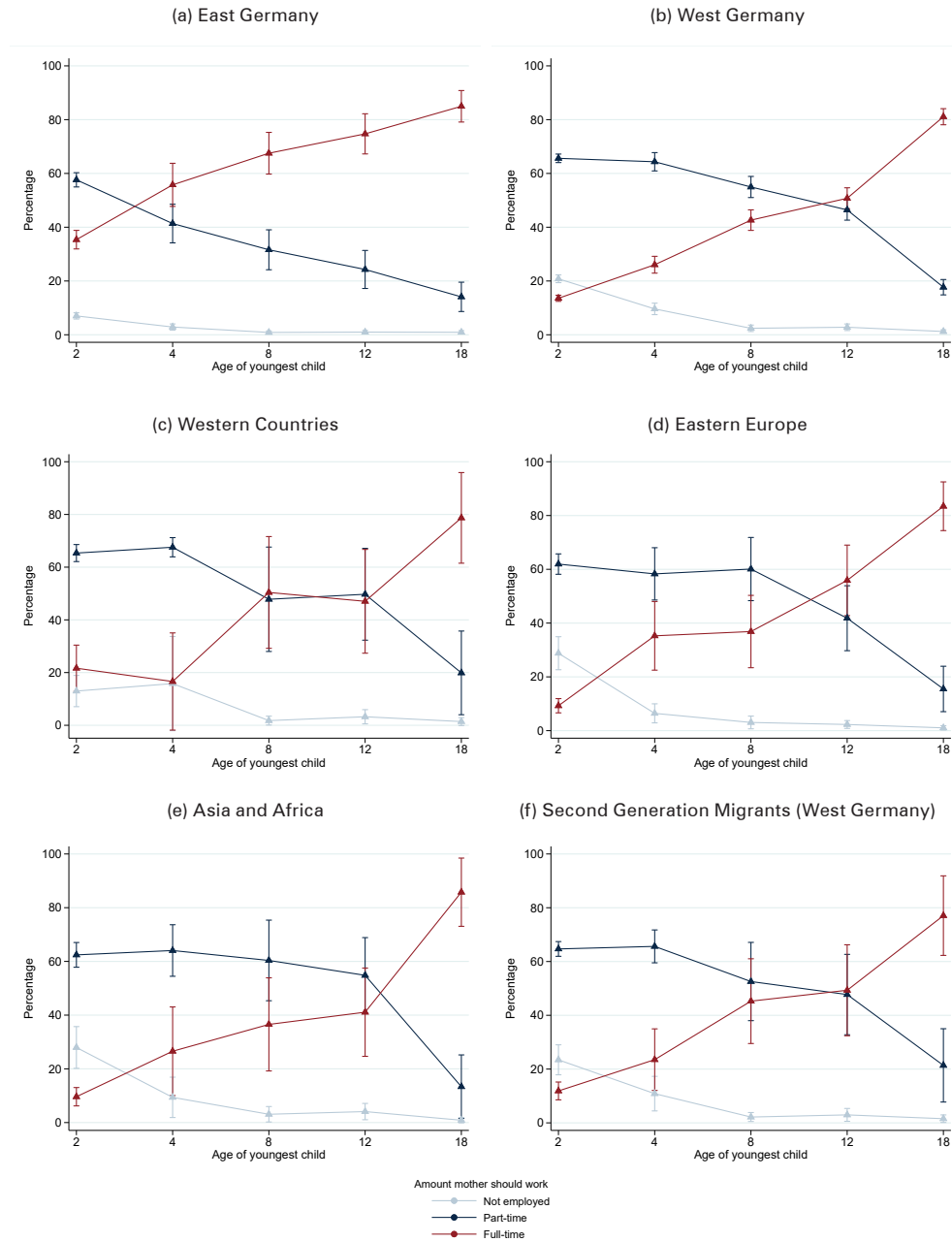
Each of the other groups exhibit a slightly different evolution of attitudes towards full-time employment. Among women who migrated from Eastern Europe, there is a noticeable change in the level of endorsement of full-time employment between the scenario with the mother of a two-year-old (11 percent endorsement) and a four-year-old (38 percent). A similar shift in attitudes is visible among women from immigrant families in West Germany. In both cases, the attitudinal questions about a generic “pre-school child” used in conventional surveys conceal this stark difference.

With the exception of women in East Germany, full-time employment becomes the preferred option only when the youngest child is set at 12, albeit estimates for some groups are less precise. The scenario with an 18-year-old elicits a clear endorsement (around 80 percent) for full-time employment across all groups, with the exception of women from Asia and Africa and Western countries, who display a lower approval (around 60 percent) towards full-time employment for this scenario.

### *Men’s attitudes*

We now turn to attitudes toward maternal employment among men, again differentiated by the youngest child’s age in a hypothetical scenario displayed along the horizontal axis and by support for full-time employment, part-time employment, and no employment at all (Fig. 3). The patterns are very similar to those reported for women, pointing to little difference in the views of men and women once more detailed questions on work and care arrangements are asked. Two exceptions stand out in this overall similarity between genders. First, support for the idea that a mother of a two-year-old should not work at all is slightly higher among men than women. The difference is most visible among migrants from Eastern Europe, with 29 percent of men indicating mothers should not work (compared to only 17 percent of women). Second, men appear to be less supportive of maternal part-time employment and more supportive of full-time employment than women. Indeed, the dark blue lines tend to rise and light blue lines tend to decline more steeply than in Figure 2. This is particularly noticeable in the case of respondents from East Germany. Almost 70 percent of men from East Germany think mothers of eight-year-olds should work full-time, whereas only 55 percent of women think so. Thus, it seems that views on what mothers should do also bear some consistency with patterns of actual employment among respondents, whereby men – who are less likely to be burdened by the “double-shift” – have slightly more favourable views of full-time employment than women do.

**Fig. 3:** Attitudes towards maternal employment depending on the age of the youngest child, by respondent country of origin (men)



Note: The figures show the attitudes towards maternal employment depending on the age of the youngest child. The vertical lines represent the 95% confidence intervals.

Source: FReDA (2021), weighted, own calculations.

### 3.2 Attitudes toward paternal employment

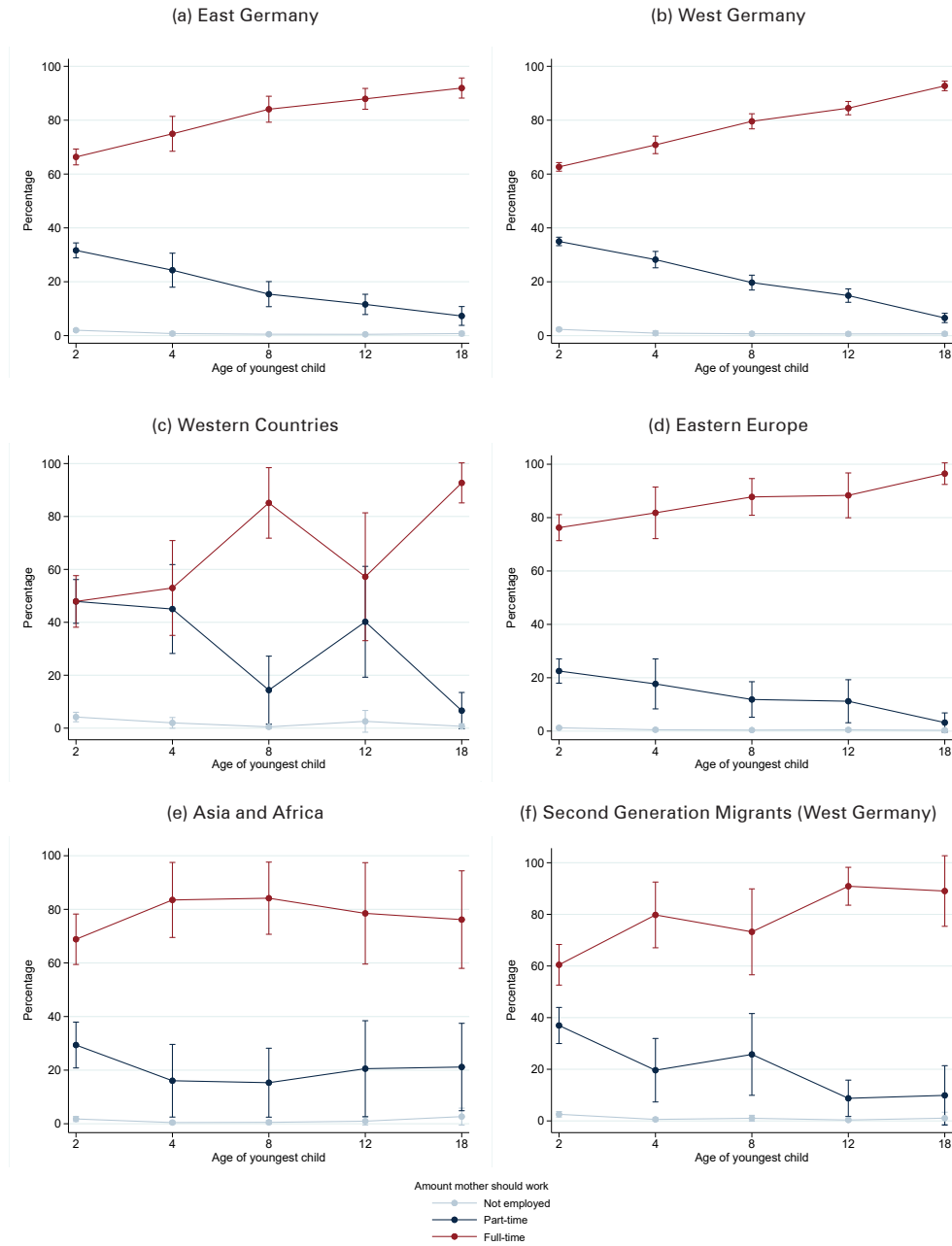
So far, we have only examined views about how much mothers should work when their children are of different ages, without querying views on fathers' employment patterns. It may be that the assumption that fathers work full-time has also eroded, more so for some groups than for others. It is this question that we now focus on. Figures 4 and 5 report attitudes toward paternal employment among women and men, respectively. The graphs are organised in six panels, like the previous figures, differentiating along the youngest child's age on the horizontal axis and by type of employment – full-time, part-time, and no employment. Although we conducted the analyses separately, we here discuss the results from Figures 4 and 5 together. We control for the same variables mentioned above. Two patterns are common to all groups and to women and men alike. First, views that fathers should not be in employment are essentially completely absent. Second, the notion that fathers should work full-time is held by the majority of respondents across all groups.

Differences emerge, however, in relation to part-time employment. At least one-third of women support the idea that fathers of two-year-olds should work part-time. The only exception is women from Eastern Europe, at 23 percent. Among men, there are sizable differences across groups. Among men from West Germany and from Western countries, between 30 and 39 percent state that fathers of two-year-olds should work part-time. Among all other groups, endorsement for paternal part-time employment is less common, hovering at around 20 percent. The support for paternal part-time employment tends to decline as the hypothetical child grows older, although never so rapidly as to become negligible. For example, even among men from East Germany, one in seven thinks that fathers of eight-year-olds should work part-time.

### 3.3 Attitudes towards combinations of maternal and paternal employment

Findings on attitudes towards paternal employment have revealed a fairly large approval of fathers working part-time when a child is very young, e.g., age two. We now focus on this family scenario, with a mother, father and two children, the youngest of whom is two years old, and report what combination of maternal and paternal employment respondents favour (Fig. 6). We start with attitudes among women (Fig. 6, Panel a). Attitudes in favour of the "male breadwinner model" are generally held by a minority in all groups, but they are most common among women from Asia and Africa, as one fourth of them indicate that mothers of two-year-olds should not be in employment while fathers should work full-time. This "traditional" division of labour is, by contrast, endorsed by only 12 percent of women in West Germany and by 3 percent of those in East Germany. Attitudes in favour of the "one-and-a-half-earner model" are much more widespread, reflecting actual patterns of employment whereby mothers work part-time and fathers full-time. But significant differences across groups remain: whereas among women from East and West Germany approval of the "one-and-a-half-earner model" is slightly below and above

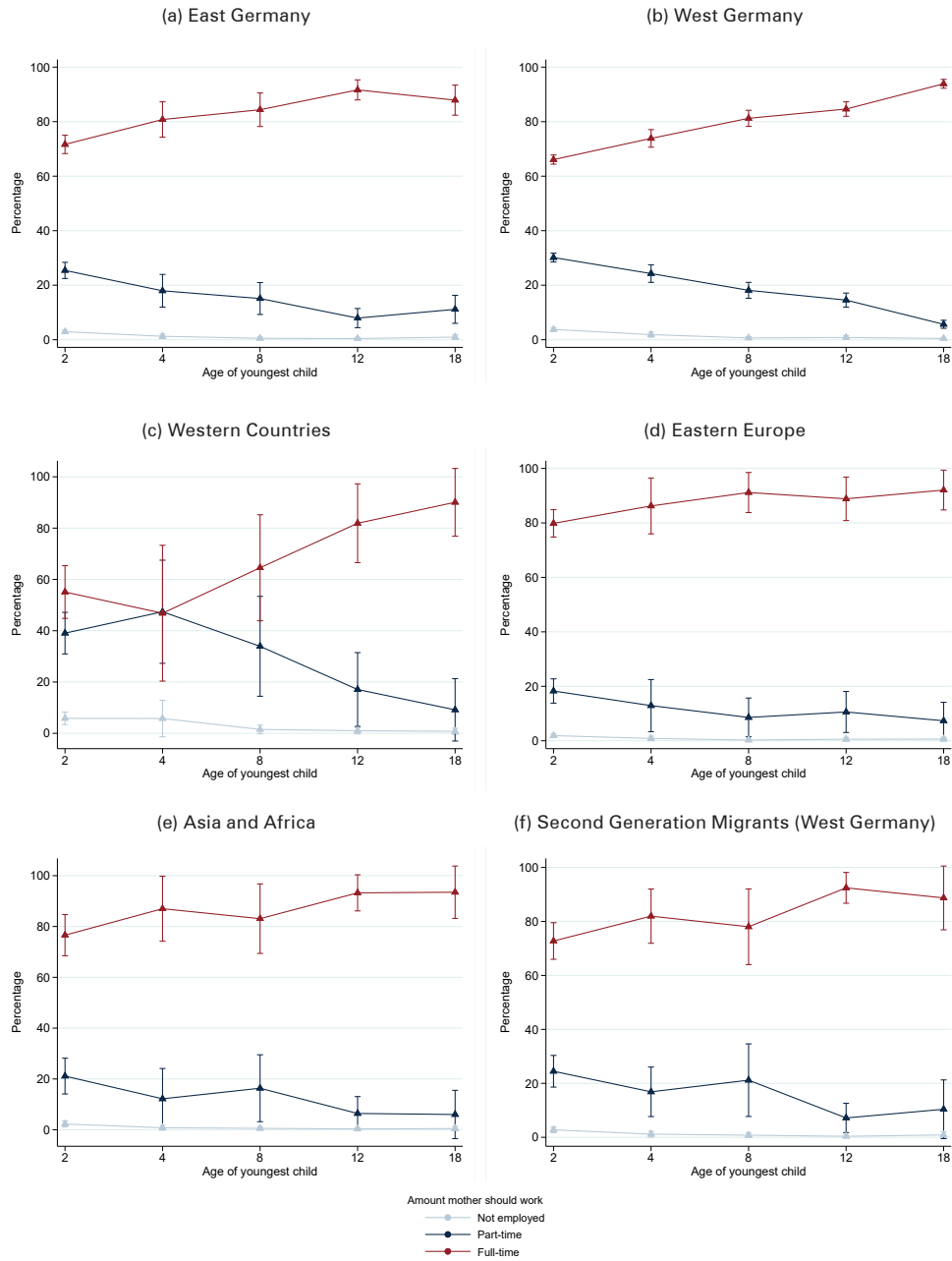
**Fig. 4:** Attitudes towards paternal employment depending on the age of the youngest child, by respondent country of origin (women)



Note: The figures show the attitudes towards paternal employment depending on the age of the youngest child. The vertical lines represent the 95% confidence intervals.  
 Source: FReDA (2021), weighted, own calculations.

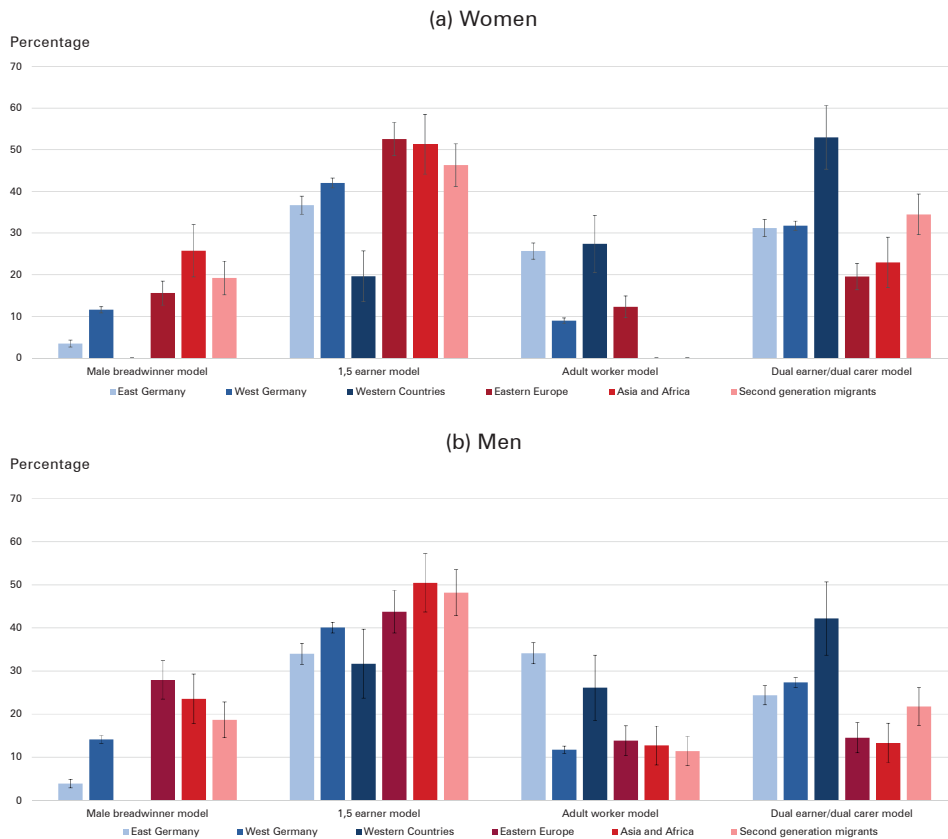


**Fig. 5:** Attitudes towards paternal employment depending on the age of the youngest child, by respondent country of origin (men)



Note: The figures show the attitudes towards paternal employment depending on the age of the youngest child. The vertical lines represent the 95% confidence intervals.  
 Source: FReDA (2021), weighted, own calculations.

**Fig. 6:** Attitudes towards maternal and paternal employment combined, for hypothetical parents of two-year-olds, by respondent country of origin



Note: The figures show the combined attitudes towards maternal and paternal employment, under the family scenario of parents with two children, the youngest of which is two years old. The male breadwinner model describes a division of labour whereby the mother is not employed and the father works full-time. In the 1,5-earner model, the mother works part-time and the father full-time. The adult worker model corresponds to both mother and father working full-time. The dual earner/dual carer model corresponds to both parents working part-time. The residual category includes all other answers and is not shown. Categories with less than 30 observations are not shown in the graph.

Source: FReDA (2021), weighted, own calculations.

the 40 percent mark respectively, among women from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia, the approval rate hovers around 50 percent. Second-generation migrant women place between these groups, with 46 percent favouring this division of labour.

The “adult worker” model represents a symmetric allocation of paid employment whereby both mothers and fathers work full-time. This model is endorsed by slightly more than a quarter of women from East Germany, and only by a smaller minority

of women from West Germany (9 percent) or Eastern Europe (12 percent). The “dual earner/dual carer” also exemplifies a symmetric division of labour, not only between genders but also between care responsibilities and paid employment. This model is the second most favoured one by women from East and West Germany, as well as by those from Eastern European countries and second-generation migrant women.

Across models, women from Western countries tend to exhibit very distinctive attitudes, with an especially high approval rate for the “dual earner/dual carer.” While this finding is interesting, it should be noted that this group is relatively small. Overall, women from different geographical origins tend to share a fairly high support for the “one-and-a-half- earner model” but they vary in their support for more symmetric arrangements such as the “adult worker” model and the “dual earner/dual carer” model.

Men’s attitudes towards these different models mirror those of women fairly closely. Among men, support for the “male breadwinner model” is also relatively higher among immigrant groups, in particular those from Africa and Asia, but also those from Eastern Europe and second-generation migrants (Fig. 6, Panel b), confirming the higher prevalence of “traditional” attitudes among certain groups. By contrast, a distinctive feature of attitudes among men is their slightly higher support for the “adult worker” model relative to women. For example, among respondents from East Germany, 34 percent of men favour full-time employment for both mothers and fathers of a two-year-old, against 26 percent of women. Among men from Africa and Asia and those who are second-generation migrants, approval for the “adult worker model” is generally low (13 percent and 11 percent, respectively), but nonetheless higher than among women from those same groups, who show no support for such an allocation of paid employment. Overall, whereas men are more inclined to favour a symmetric division of labour between the sexes whereby both parents work full-time, women express attitudes in favour of a model which is also symmetric in its time allocation between paid employment and care responsibilities, with both parents working part-time.

### 3.4 Discussion

Overall, the detailed questions included in FReDA allow for a much more nuanced picture of attitudes toward maternal employment than is usually the case with other surveys, which rely on the conventional item “*A pre-school child suffers if his or her mother works.*” By presenting respondents with fictional families with children of different ages, the findings from FReDA show important differences in attitudes which do not come to light when using the conventional question on a generic pre-school child and maternal employment status. The distinction between children aged two and those aged four is particularly crucial for at least two reasons. First, substantial proportions of men and women think mothers of two-year-olds should stay home. Second, it allows us to isolate an age group – two-year-olds – who, since 2013, have the legal right to a place in a day care centre in Germany. Still, in contrast to their slightly older peers, the majority of two-year-olds in West Germany do not attend, while the majority in East Germany do (*Autor:innengruppe*

*Bildungsberichterstattung* 2020). Furthermore, the distinction between younger and older children also reveals that attitudes toward employment remain highly gendered well after children enter school, in line with the high care needs of children in elementary school age (e.g., *Gambaro et al.* 2019).

Another important feature of the data is that it allows us to differentiate between full-time and part-time employment. This is critical in a context such as West Germany, where reducing employment hours has been a chief reconciliation strategy for mothers. Indeed, when excluding toddlers, differences in attitudes toward maternal employment are best captured by views on part-time employment.

Against this highly differentiated picture, our analysis reveals remarkable differences between population groups with different geographical origins. Yet the most prominent differences are not those between native Germans and immigrants – Rather, it is those between East and West Germans. Within the immigrant population, the distinction between different regions of origin carries important insights. One clear finding is the considerable heterogeneity between groups, indicating that there are divergent ideals of employment and care among immigrants. This latter point is perhaps most visible when looking at views about paternal employment. Results signal the emergence of attitudes favouring a more symmetric division of labour, whereby fathers should also scale back employment hours. This result is especially clear in the case of respondents from West Germany, where a more equally shared familism seems to be emerging alongside long-standing traditional gender norms. Furthermore, results for second-generation migrants show that they mostly adapt to their West German peers, with the exception that they on average still have more traditional attitudes toward maternal employment when the child is two years old.

All these differences are brought together in the final set of analyses, which combines attitudes towards maternal and paternal employment. The difference between respondents from West and East Germany is captured by the substantial support for the “adult worker” model in East Germany, with a quarter of women and a third of men saying that mothers and fathers of two-year-olds should both work full-time. In contrast, when respondents from West Germany express support of a gender-symmetric division of labour, this tends to be the “dual earner/dual carer” model. However, differences between respondents from East and West Germany are more marked among men than among women. For one thing, more men than women in East Germany are in favour of full-time maternal employment, perhaps because they are less aware of the time demands that children bring or implicitly take a “double shift” of women into account (e.g. *Jessen* 2022). For another, more men than women in West Germany are in favour of the male breadwinner model.

Among migrant groups, with the exception of those from Western countries, attitudes in favour of the traditional male-breadwinner model are still common, although almost half of respondents endorse the “one-and-a-half-earner” model with the father working full-time and the mother part-time.

Our analysis is not without limitations. First, migrants with a low proficiency in the German language are likely to be underrepresented. By using weights that adjust for education and migration background, we partly address this issue, but our results can only be considered an accurate reflection of attitudes among relatively

integrated migrants. Second, migrants are an extremely heterogeneous group, and our grouping is rather coarse. However, we were able to differentiate between first- and second-generation migrants, and highlight important differences along macro-regions of origin.

#### 4 Conclusion

Although the aggregate employment rate of mothers has been increasing in Germany, there are still large differences by the age of the youngest child, region, and migration background. Our analyses have uncovered how these differences in actual employment are also mirrored in differences in *attitudes* towards maternal employment. We examine the extent to which these attitudes vary by presenting respondents from different regions of origin with different hypothetical family scenarios.

For mothers with young children, part-time work remains the most common pattern in all groups (see Section 1). Part-time employment is a recurrent theme in policy discussions about demographic change and the resulting tightness on the labour market. Expanding the working hours of mothers is seen as a measure to counteract a shrinking labour force. However, a rather neglected topic in this context is the particularly low labour supply of mothers with migration backgrounds. Activating this group's labour market potential could be one way to alleviate the problem of a decreasing supply of labour. To assess the potential success of such activation strategies, it is important to have a clear understanding of attitudes toward maternal employment, among both migrant as well as non-migrant groups.

The results of our empirical analysis shed light on the various differences in these attitudes: between women and men, between East and West Germans, between immigrants and native Germans, and between attitudes toward maternal and paternal employment according to the age of the child in question. While it appears that part-time employment is always, and by far, the preferred option, labour market inactivity remains favoured by a substantial proportion of women from West Germany (whether from immigrant or native-born families) and by women from Eastern European countries, Asia, and Africa, making it the second most common attitude combination within these groups when the child is younger than two. With the exception of women in East Germany, full-time employment is not favoured until the youngest child is twelve years old; among East Germans, this is already the case when the child is four. Women from Asia and Africa are an exception, however, as they are more supportive of part-time employment for mothers, regardless of children's age. As for men's attitudes toward maternal employment, our results show that the majority of East German men believe that mothers of eight-year-old children should work full-time, while only half of women hold this view.

From a policy perspective, our results show that the availability of day care for children before school age as well as afternoon care for elementary school children is important and necessary, because attitudes are in favour of mothers working. The entitlement to an after-school care place from 2025 seems to be a promising

measure to attract more mothers to the German labour market (see also *Gambaro et al. 2019; Bach et al. 2020*) as the provision of school lunches and after-school programs are necessary to enable even part-time work, once commuting times are taken into account. Moreover, there is also a need for more all-day care slots in day care centres for toddlers and preschool children. Up to now, the legal entitlement for a day care slot before school covers six hours only, which might not be enough to enable the employment of mothers and fathers.

Future studies will have to examine whether the expansion of day care services for primary school children will further change attitudes toward maternal employment in the same way that the provision of day care services for very young children resulted in greater approval for maternal employment (see e.g., *Zoch/Schober 2018; Ellingsæter et al. 2017*). Immigrant women disapproving of maternal employment are of particular interest, as this group currently has the lowest labour force participation rate and a low attendance rate in day care, although they express a demand for higher attendances (*BMFSFJ 2020 and Schmitz et al. 2023*). A better availability and quality of day care could contribute to increase their attachment to and participation in the labour force (e.g., *Gambaro et al. 2021*).

While most opinion surveys have been slow to investigate views on fathers' employment, we were able to test whether support for fathers working full-time remains universal. Our results show that while the majority of respondents across all groups express the view that fathers should work full-time regardless of their children's age, support for paternal part-time employment is sizable. For example, among men from West Germany and other Western countries, a substantial percentage believe that fathers of two-year-olds should work part-time. This needs to be considered by policy makers and employers when designing and implementing reconciliation measures.

In sum, FReDA offers many possibilities for the analysis of gender norms among different groups of families. Investigating attitudes about mothers' and fathers' employment, as we do here, can help illuminate underlying changes in cultural norms, and, importantly, can provide clues about how to craft work and family policies that garner public support.

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## Appendix

**Tab. A1:** Number of observations per group

	2 years	4 years	8 years	12 years	18 years
Women					
East Germany	1,922	392	373	411	355
West Germany	7,004	1,449	1,442	1,444	1,551
Western Countries	190	42	34	41	39
Eastern Europe	667	134	136	136	134
Asia and Africa	269	47	64	51	53
Second generation migrants	423	92	101	75	88
Men					
East Germany	1,453	289	331	327	337
West Germany	5,807	1,326	1,258	1,298	1,292
Western Countries	159	40	34	34	37
Eastern Europe	447	95	97	97	104
Asia and Africa	270	52	71	59	51
Second generation migrants	373	100	83	83	77

Source: FReDA (2021), own calculations.

**Tab. A2:** Attitudes toward maternal employment depending on the age of the youngest child (by gender)

	(1) 2 years	(2) 4 years Women	(3) 8 years	(4) 12 years	(5) 18 years
Country of origin (ref: Native (West Germany))					
East Germany	1.224*** (0.087)	1.488*** (0.179)	1.084*** (0.187)	0.995*** (0.174)	0.299 (0.218)
Western Countries	0.592+ (0.330)	-0.378 (0.564)	-1.113+ (0.604)	-0.359 (0.602)	-0.965+ (0.570)
Eastern Europe	-0.010 (0.206)	0.203 (0.436)	-0.079 (0.432)	-0.149 (0.442)	-0.324 (0.397)
Asia and Africa	-0.462 (0.318)	-1.971** (0.687)	-0.629 (0.743)	-0.560 (0.722)	-1.436** (0.545)
Second generation migrants	-0.565** (0.174)	0.419 (0.398)	-0.810* (0.370)	-0.095 (0.385)	-0.161 (0.524)
Highest educational degree (ref: no degree)					
Vocational degree	0.003 (0.109)	-0.359 (0.250)	-0.755*** (0.228)	-0.209 (0.220)	-0.168 (0.242)
Tertiary education	0.776*** (0.110)	0.290 (0.236)	-0.034 (0.218)	0.145 (0.219)	0.202 (0.247)
Labour force status (ref: not employed)					
Part-time	0.220* (0.111)	0.129 (0.267)	-0.465* (0.234)	-0.184 (0.218)	-0.223 (0.251)
Full-time	0.738*** (0.115)	1.058*** (0.253)	0.875*** (0.220)	0.842*** (0.219)	0.733** (0.265)
Age	-0.028** (0.010)	0.017 (0.024)	-0.009 (0.023)	-0.022 (0.022)	0.006 (0.019)
Duration of stay in Germany	-0.003 (0.009)	-0.038+ (0.022)	-0.031 (0.021)	-0.020 (0.020)	-0.030+ (0.018)
Observations	10226	2129	2114	2128	2183

Tab. A2: Continuation

	(1) 2 years	(2) 4 years	(3) 8 years	(4) 12 years	(5) 18 years
Men					
Country of origin (ref: Native (West Germany))					
East Germany	1.374*** (0.092)	1.363*** (0.194)	1.206*** (0.214)	1.355*** (0.231)	0.324 (0.262)
Western Countries	0.232 (0.312)	-1.176+ (0.683)	-1.019+ (0.612)	-0.178 (0.534)	-0.910 (0.793)
Eastern Europe	-0.638** (0.227)	-0.002 (0.493)	-1.176** (0.401)	0.0920 (0.422)	-0.238 (0.426)
Asia and Africa	-0.652* (0.303)	-0.782 (0.624)	-1.625*** (0.431)	-0.335 (0.507)	-0.394 (0.697)
Second generation migrants	-0.161 (0.165)	-0.145 (0.322)	0.0211 (0.344)	-0.160 (0.369)	-0.297 (0.454)
Highest educational degree (ref: no degree)					
Vocational degree	-0.008 (0.104)	-0.654** (0.206)	-0.089 (0.219)	-0.008 (0.212)	-0.060 (0.299)
Tertiary education	0.549*** (0.105)	-0.233 (0.211)	0.766*** (0.225)	0.566** (0.209)	-0.060 (0.292)
Labour force status (ref: not employed)					
Part-time	0.052 (0.140)	0.252 (0.294)	-0.060 (0.294)	-0.303 (0.304)	-0.369 (0.335)
Full-time	0.219+ (0.125)	0.298 (0.268)	0.132 (0.245)	0.320 (0.256)	0.602* (0.296)
Age	-0.003 (0.011)	0.027 (0.023)	0.040 (0.026)	-0.036* (0.018)	0.015 (0.024)
Duration of stay in Germany	-0.017 (0.010)	-0.026 (0.020)	-0.068** (0.024)	-0.004 (0.017)	-0.033 (0.023)
Observations	8418	1888	1855	1875	1883

Note: +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ . Standard errors in parentheses.  
Source: FReDA (2021), weighted, own calculations.

**Tab. A3:** Attitudes toward paternal employment depending on the age of the youngest child (by gender)

	(1) 2 years	(2) 4 years	(3) 8 years	(4) 12 years	(5) 18 years
Women					
Country of origin (ref: Native (West Germany))					
East Germany	0.053 (0.078)	0.133 (0.195)	0.222 (0.209)	0.216 (0.215)	-0.207 (0.294)
Western Countries	-0.543+ (0.290)	-0.979+ (0.532)	-0.248 (0.690)	-1.623* (0.759)	-0.439 (0.776)
Eastern Europe	0.438* (0.206)	0.204 (0.482)	-0.063 (0.484)	0.144 (0.582)	0.556 (0.665)
Asia and Africa	0.182 (0.350)	0.391 (0.688)	-0.639 (0.663)	-0.632 (0.708)	-2.357*** (0.676)
Second generation migrants	-0.067 (0.174)	0.439 (0.450)	-0.518 (0.466)	0.374 (0.490)	-0.451 (0.725)
Highest educational degree (ref: no degree)					
Vocational degree	0.402*** (0.100)	0.342 (0.218)	0.157 (0.270)	0.554+ (0.291)	0.437 (0.354)
Tertiary education	-0.471*** (0.096)	-0.424* (0.208)	-0.807*** (0.225)	-0.388 (0.263)	-0.425 (0.319)
Labour force status (ref: not employed)					
Part-time	-0.135 (0.098)	-0.244 (0.218)	-0.301 (0.243)	-0.350 (0.266)	-0.378 (0.309)
Full-time	0.236* (0.097)	0.157 (0.224)	0.303 (0.244)	0.756** (0.266)	0.709+ (0.389)
Age	0.036*** (0.011)	0.046* (0.022)	0.054* (0.025)	0.010 (0.024)	0.058* (0.028)
Duration of stay in Germany	-0.012 (0.010)	-0.021 (0.020)	-0.047+ (0.025)	-0.018 (0.022)	-0.048+ (0.028)
Observations	10226	2129	2114	2128	2183

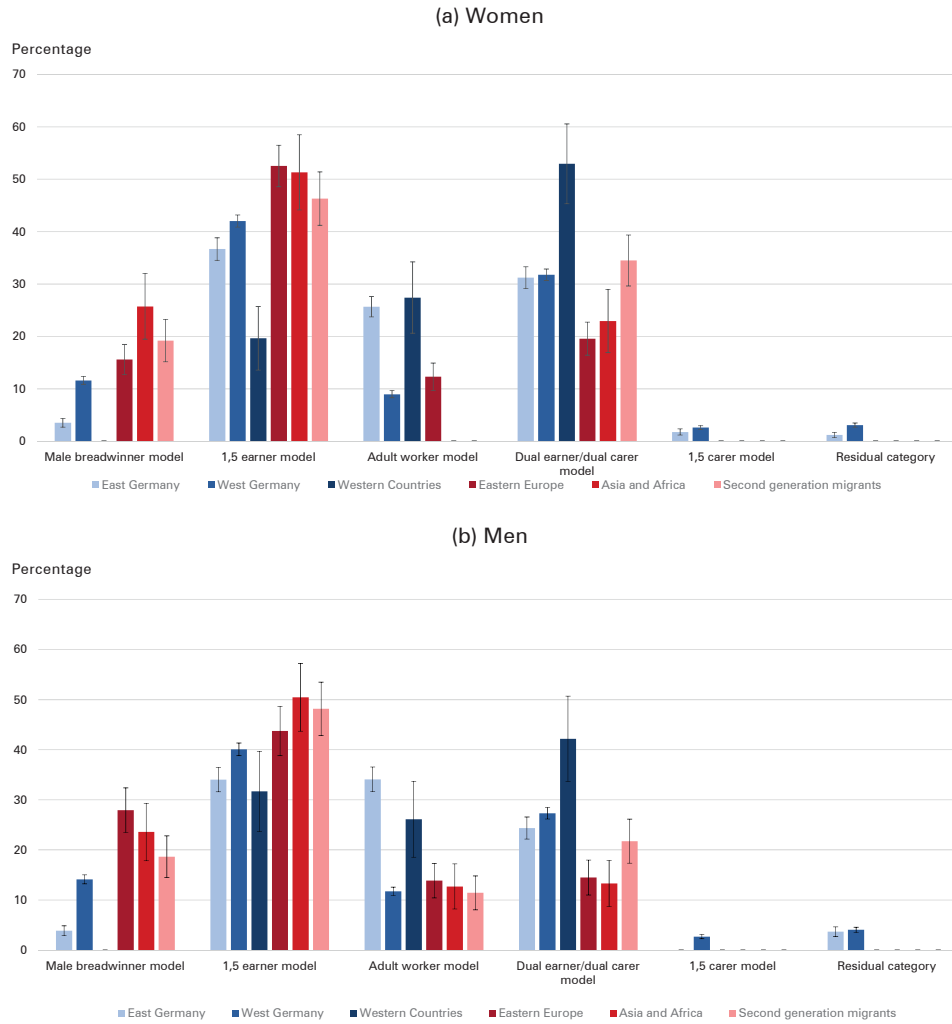


Tab. A3: Continuation

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	2 years	4 years	8 years	12 years	18 years
Men					
Country of origin (ref: Native (West Germany))					
East Germany	0.201*	0.297	0.256	0.856**	-0.854**
	(0.096)	(0.234)	(0.260)	(0.275)	(0.318)
Western Countries	-0.769*	-0.995	-1.563*	-0.435	-0.903
	(0.311)	(0.668)	(0.719)	(0.523)	(0.968)
Eastern Europe	0.335	0.733	0.473	-0.211	-0.450
	(0.249)	(0.587)	(0.731)	(0.662)	(0.546)
Asia and Africa	0.181	1.046	-0.598	0.588	-0.342
	(0.380)	(0.807)	(0.645)	(0.841)	(0.860)
Second generation migrants	0.391*	0.562	-0.101	0.698	-0.661
	(0.189)	(0.379)	(0.470)	(0.470)	(0.708)
Highest educational degree (ref: no degree)					
Vocational degree	0.097	-0.093	-0.276	-0.117	0.116
	(0.111)	(0.258)	(0.299)	(0.292)	(0.410)
Tertiary education	-0.480***	-0.778**	-0.318	-0.653*	-0.458
	(0.110)	(0.259)	(0.303)	(0.277)	(0.377)
Labour force status (ref: not employed)					
Part-time	-0.344*	-0.337	-0.282	-0.707*	-0.696+
	(0.134)	(0.285)	(0.309)	(0.340)	(0.423)
Full-time	0.745***	1.178***	1.032***	0.886**	0.869*
	(0.120)	(0.268)	(0.295)	(0.320)	(0.392)
Age	0.032*	-0.006	0.027	0.009	0.019
	(0.013)	(0.029)	(0.040)	(0.023)	(0.023)
Duration of stay in Germany	-0.024+	0.002	-0.041	-0.017	-0.017
	(0.012)	(0.026)	(0.038)	(0.021)	(0.020)
Observations	8334	1876	1845	1862	1871

Note: +  $p < 0.10$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ . Standard errors in parentheses.  
Source: FReDA (2021), weighted, own calculations.

**Fig. A1:** Attitudes towards maternal and paternal employment for parents of two-year-olds



Note: The figures show the attitudes towards maternal and paternal employment for parents of two-year-olds. Adult worker model includes answers which state that the both parents should work full-time. Dual carer/dual earner model are answers in which both parents should work part-time. The 1,5 Earner Model is a category in which the mother should work part-time and the father full-time, the 1,5 Carer Model that the mother should not work and the father should work part-time. The male breadwinner model describes a scenario in which the mother should not work and the father should work full-time. The residual category includes all other answers. Due to small sample sizes, we cannot calculate valid numbers for some categories and therefore categories with less than 30 individuals are not shown in the graph.

Source: FReDA (2021), weighted, own calculations.

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