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Working-Time flexibility and Union Dissolutions: Evidence for couples in Germany

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Abstract:
Objective: This study examines the relationship between men's and women's working-time flexibility and relationship dissolutions (cohabitating and married couples) in Germany
Background: Globalisation and technological advancements have popularised flexible working hours, necessitating a deeper understanding of their implications on family dynamics and relationship stability. Employee-oriented flexibility, which allows workers to adjust their schedules to meet family needs, generally supports work-family balance and reduces conflict, yet it can also blur the boundaries between work and personal life and may reduce family time. On the other hand, employer-oriented flexibility, characterised by unpredictable hours, can heighten marital strain and increase the risk of relationship dissolution.
Method: Using data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), the final sample consists of 15,519 cohabiting and married couples, and the number of relationship dissolutions during the analysed time period is 1,463. The study employs event history analysis to explore the relationship between working-time flexibility and relationship dissolutions, differentiating by gender, parental status and the age of the youngest child.
Results: Preliminary results indicated that employee-oriented flexibility of men tends to lower the risk of dissolution among couples with more than 2 children, especially when they are young, highlighting its benefits in facilitating family responsibilities. Any significant results on employer-oriented flexibility have not been found in comparison to fixed schedules.
Conclusion: Fathers' more than mothers' working-time flexibility relates to lowering the risk of relationship dissolutions, especially when children are young and in families with two or more kids, suggesting that men's control over their schedules may facilitate greater involvement at home and alleviate care burdens on women.

Keywords: working-time flexibility, couples, flexible hours, dissolutions, Germany

JEL codes: J11, J17, J18, J24, J81

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1. Introduction

Prior research has long recognised partners' employment as an important determinant of relationship stability (e.g. Cooke et al., 2013; Kalmijn & Poortman, 2006; Mencarini & Vignoli, 2018). Whereas partners' employment secures household income and reduces economic strain (Oppenheimer, 1997; Raz-Yurovich, 2011), employment also poses challenges for partners, such as larger time constraints and greater tensions associated with juggling professional and domestic responsibilities (Shockley et al., 2025). Such challenges can reduce partnership quality and, in some cases, increase the risk of union dissolution, particularly when the occupational and childcare demands limit opportunities for shared time and joint leisure (Flood & Genadek, 2016).

In recent decades, globalisation and rapid technological change have profoundly reshaped labour markets, giving rise to new flexible work arrangements (Stromquist, 2019), which potentially influence partners' work-family balance, time spent together, and consequently their union stability. One prominent development is the flexibilization of working time, which can take different forms. Employee-oriented flexibility, i.e., when partners can decide about their working schedules, can help adjust professional obligations to the family's needs and the other partner's working schedule (Bryan & Sevilla, 2017; Carlson et al., 2010). Workers who have employee-oriented flexibility may avoid tensions between paid work and family life and may be able to spend more time with their partner/spouse, which positively affects their union stability. Employer-oriented flexibility, by contrast, is characterised by unpredictable and employer-imposed working schedules which can negatively impact the time with the partner (Fernández-Iturrate et al., 2022; Presser, 2000), disrupt family routines and complicate combining paid work with childcare (Harknett et al., 2022; Luhr et al., 2022), eventually increasing conflict between partners and resulting in relationship dissolution.

Working time arrangements may play a particularly important role in the quality and stability of unions among dual-earner couples with young children—that is, couples in which both partners are balancing paid work and childcare. Although most spouses prefer synchronised leisure time (Hallberg, 2003), parents in dual-earning couples often must desynchronize their schedules to fulfil caregiving obligations (Mills & Täht, 2010; Scheffel, 2010; Täht & Mills, 2012). Employee-oriented flexibility enables such desynchronisation, but may also lead to unintended consequences, such as 'tag-team' parenting (Hattery, 2001), when partners alternate responsibilities without meaningful shared time. It can thus act as "a double-edged sword", on the one hand reducing work-family conflict, thereby lowering tensions

between partners, but on the other hand weakening emotional connection and straining the relationship (Täht & Mills, 2011; Wight et al., 2008). In turn, employer-imposed unpredictable schedules can disrupt couples' coordination efforts and undermine relationship stability, particularly among parents of young children, who often rely on predictable routines to manage caregiving responsibilities.

Despite growing scholarly interest in working conditions and family well-being (Bianchi & Milkie, 2010; Tammelin et al., 2017), the role of working-time flexibility - and crucially, its form - remains underexamined in research on union dissolution. Most studies focus on employment status, non-standard working hours or broad indicators of work strain (e.g. Donnelly, 2020; Kalil et al., 2010; Presser, 2000; Täht & Mills, 2011, 2012), overlooking how flexibility of working time might affect relationship outcomes, especially if considering male and female partners and in the context of childcare obligations. Understanding how working-time flexibility affects union stability is, however, of high relevance given that both types of flexibilities have become widespread in contemporary labour markets (Chung & Tijdens, 2013).

This study addresses these research gaps by investigating how partners' working-time flexibilities - differentiating between employee- and employer-oriented flexibility - are associated with the risk of union dissolution in Germany. We further examine how these associations vary by gender and parental status, thereby accounting for key demographic and social dimensions that structure family life. This approach contributes conceptually to the literature by clarifying the distinct effects of flexibility type (employee vs. employer driven), and distribution across partners - dimensions often conflated or ignored in prior research on partnership stability. Situating our analysis in Germany, a country with moderate but stable levels of union dissolution (~280.3 per 1,000 marriages with duration of between 0 and 25 years; Destatis, 2024) and average levels of working-time flexibility in the European context (Backhaus et al., 2020; Lott & Chung, 2016), allows us to explore these relationships in a modernised male-breadwinner setting.

With the use of the data from the German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) for the period of 2004-2019 and event history analysis, we find that employee-oriented flexibility of men is associated with a reduced risk of union dissolution - but only in couples with young children and in families with two or more children - suggesting that men's control over their schedules may facilitate greater involvement at home and alleviate care burdens on women. Interestingly, we find no evidence that employer-oriented flexibility relates to the risk of union dissolution,

pointing to the importance of distinguishing between forms of flexibility when assessing their impact on family outcomes.

2. Background

2.1. Partners' employment and union dissolution

Early economic theories, most notably specialisation theory (Becker, 1981) and related independence hypothesis (Becker et al., 1977), framed relationship stability and partners' economic activity primarily in terms of gendered divisions of labour. They emphasised the stabilising effect of men's employment and the destabilising effect of women's employment, arguing that erosion of gendered specialisation reduces the traditional benefits of marriage and empowers women with resources to exit unsatisfying relationships. These perspectives reflected, however, the gender norms and employment relations of the 1960s and 1970s when men's employment was relatively stable and mothers' employment was socially contested (Donnelly et al., 2016; Macunovich, 1996). More modern theoretical approaches, such as status maintenance and status enhancement theories (Oppenheimer 1997) and the family stress theory (Boss, 2002), propose that partners' employment can stabilise unions by reducing economic stress.

Yet, income is only one dimension of union stability. Dual-earner couples, particularly couples with children, often experience time scarcity, which can have significant repercussions for the amount of time partners can spend together, especially if their working hours do not overlap (Bianchi, 2011). Reduced shared time can, in turn, weaken connection and emotional closeness, diminish opportunities for meaningful communication, and ultimately erode relationship satisfaction and stability (Girme et al., 2014; Johnson & Anderson, 2013; van Houdt & Poortman, 2018). Moreover, working parents can also experience tensions between paid work and childcare, whereas juggling the demands of professional life with childcare and domestic responsibilities, which can further strain the relationship and contribute to its dissolution (Sigle-Rushton, 2010; Mencarini & Vignoli, 2018).

Past research has shown that external childcare support and more equal distribution of unpaid labour between partners increase union stability, likely by weakening work-family tensions and increasing the amount of leisure time together (Hardoy & Schøne, 2008; Mencarini & Vignoli, 2018; Sigle-Rushton, 2010). In this study, we argue that working time flexibility can also support or undermine partners' ability to share caregiving responsibilities, spend time

together and maintain relationship quality. The impact of working time flexibility on union stability depends, however, on the specific type of flexibility involved.

2.1. Employer-oriented and employee-oriented working-time flexibility

Working-time flexibility may occur on both sides: the employee and the employer. Employee-oriented flexibility - also referred to as schedule flexibility (Bouzol-Broitman et al., 2016) - is typically described as an opportunity to adjust the start and end times to one's needs, compress, or extend work hours and choose when to work (Chung & van der Horst, 2020) and it is most commonly found in high-status occupations, usually offered as a benefit (Osiewalska & Matysiak, 2025; Taiji, 2020). Employer-oriented flexibility, in turn, is a worker's adjustment to the uncertain schedules and last-minute changes imposed by the employer (Gerstel & Clawson, 2018; Mas & Pallais, 2020). It may occur within groups of low-skilled workers on nonstandard contracts, e.g., working on call (Lehdonvirta, 2018) and in precarious low-wage jobs (Lambert et al., 2012; Swanberg et al., 2014; Taiji, 2020). However, it may also be observed among higher-educated, highly skilled workers, e.g. in managerial positions (Goldin, 2021; Green et al., 2022; Kaduk et al., 2019), where it usually comes with advantages, such as higher income or improved earning prospects (Lott & Chung, 2016).

In Germany, we can observe both types of working-time flexibility among employees. Around 40% of employees in 2019 declared the ability to control, at least to some extent (employee-oriented working-time flexibility), their working schedules (Backhaus et al., 2020). Furthermore, the persistence of having only employer-oriented flexibility based on German panel data (SOEP) reaches the level of around 21% among all types of working schedules (Lott & Chung, 2016).

2.2. Working-time schedules and union dissolutions

Several theoretical frameworks suggest possible mechanisms linking working-time flexibility with union stability, particularly via their influence on work-family conflict and time spent together. The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model proposed by Bakker and Demerouti (2007) posits that high job demands increase an employee's risk of experiencing time-based work-to-family conflicts, especially among couples with children for whom both professional and family-related demands are high.

Within this framework, employer-oriented flexibility is often viewed as a demand or stressor, thus potentially introducing uncertainty and tensions into an employee's work-family

life (Voydanoff, 2004). Workers with employer-oriented flexibility have little control over their working time schedules (Zerhouni, 2022) and may find it difficult to spend leisure time together with their partner, especially if the latter also works for pay (Fernández-Iturrate et al., 2022). In addition, such working arrangements may be particularly disruptive for couples with children, as due to the unpredictability of this arrangement, partners may find it difficult to organise and share childcare (Haley & Miller, 2015), which may cause disagreements and lead to more fatigue and tiredness, spilling over into the relationship. Overall, one can expect that employer-oriented flexibility by any partner is negatively related to union stability, and this relationship is stronger in dual earner couples with childcare obligations than in single earner couples or couples without children.

Employee-oriented flexibility, in turn, typically acts as a resource or benefit, mitigating the negative effects of high demands by facilitating improved management of the working schedule (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). As such, according to the JDR model, employee-oriented flexibility should enhance employees' capacity to align professional commitments with the needs of the family. Employees who can determine the timing of their work are also better positioned to synchronise leisure time with their partner. Employee-oriented flexibility of at least one partner may be a particularly useful resource in dual-earner households with young children. The partner with access to employee-oriented flexibility may organise the working time in order to take care of the child when the other partner works. There is evidence from Germany that women enter employment after birth more quickly (Buchler & Lutz, 2021) and earn higher wages (Langner, 2018) when the male partner has employee-oriented flexibility, suggesting that this flexibility is used to support women's involvement in the labour market. Consequently, dual-earner couples in which at least one partner has employee-oriented flexibility may experience less work-family conflict and be more satisfied with their relationships, which may, in turn, reduce the risk of union dissolution.

However, employee-oriented working-time flexibility can also negatively affect union stability. Apart from flexibility, work-family border theory (Clark, 2000; Nippert-Eng, 1996) also emphasises the importance of permeability between paid work and family domains that flexible schedules can enhance. Increased permeability may blur boundaries between professional and personal time, elevate stress, and intensify mental load (Hyland & Prottas, 2017). Employees who are granted more schedule flexibility may, in fact, work harder and more intensely in exchange for the flexibility they were offered (Kelliher & Anderson, 2010). This aligns with the "work devotion scheme", where flexibility is used not primarily for improving

work-life balance but rather for boosting job performance despite family obligations (Hofäcker & König, 2013; Kelliher & Anderson, 2010; Langner, 2018; Wanger & Zapf, 2022). Finally, even when utilised for family-related purposes, employee-oriented flexibility may reduce relationship satisfaction and consequently elevate the risk of dissolution. This scenario may occur when both partners work for pay and predominantly allocate their flexible time to childcare or domestic duties, dedicating limited time to joint activities or shared leisure. Consequently, partners engage in tag-team parenting, experiencing infrequent meaningful interactions, which may negatively impact their relationship quality (Hattery, 2001).

Taken together, these considerations suggest that the effects of employee-oriented flexibility on union stability are not straightforward. In dual-earner couples with children, such flexibility can serve as a valuable resource for managing work and family demands, especially when used to combine paid work and care. Nonetheless, it may also blur the boundaries between paid work and home, intensify workloads, and limit couple time—ultimately undermining relationship stability.

3. Data and Method

3.1. Sample

To investigate the role of partners' working time arrangements in union stability, we utilise German Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) data, an annual longitudinal household survey conducted since 1984.

Our initial sample consists of cohabiting and married couples (20,865), with both partners of working age (18-64) who took part in the survey. We exclude couples in which either a man or a woman is self-employed due to their different nature of access and use of flexible working schedules. We define union dissolution as either experiencing formal separation or divorce, whichever happens first, and in the case of cohabitation, the end of the relationship. We collect information about the couple from the moment they started cohabiting until the event of dissolution, panel attrition (i.e., when at least one partner drops out of the survey) or the last survey wave included in the study, whichever comes first. Yet, in this analysis, we observe only couples that occur in the sample during the period from 2003 to 2019, as the variable about flexibility was included in the 2003 survey for the first time. We limit our observations to the period before the pandemic to avoid potential confounding influences introduced by COVID-19, which may have affected both working-time flexibility and union stability,

thereby biasing the analysed relationship. Our final sample consists of 15,519 couples, and the number of relationship dissolutions during the analysed time period is 1,463.

3.2. Measures of working-time flexibility

The major explanatory variable measuring individual working-time arrangements is constructed based on the question about the type of working hours: "*There exist very different working time arrangements nowadays. Which of the following applies to your work best?*". The possible answers are as follows: [1] Fixed start and fixed end of the daily working period; [2] Business fixed, partly changing working hours per day; [3] No formal regulation of working time, regulate working time myself; and [4] Flextime with working time account and a certain self-determination on the daily working time in this context.

We classify answers [3] and [4] as "employee-oriented flexibility", answer [2] as "employer-oriented flexibility", and answer [1] as "fixed schedules".

The question about working-time flexibility appeared for the first time in the Wave 2003, and until 2011, it was included in the questionnaire every two waves. Starting from 2014, the question has been asked every wave. Our approach to missing data in waves where the question is not asked consists of three steps. Firstly, we check the employment status and if the person is not working, we input the category "not working" into the working-time flexibility variable. Secondly, if the person is employed, then we check the variable based on the question "if the person changed the job" the year before or the year after and if the respondent didn't change the job, then we input the information about flexibility from that wave accordingly, assuming that the working schedule types are stable within the same job. Thirdly, the other missing values we compute as a separate category: "working but no information about flexibility". We check the robustness of our findings by applying alternative imputation strategies (see the Robustness checks section).

As a result, our main explanatory variables consist of five categories: (1) "no flexibility", (2) "employee-oriented working-time flexibility", (3) "employer-oriented working-time flexibility", (4) "not working", and (5) "working but no information about flexibility". We create separate variables for men and women, which we use in the main analysis.

3.3. Other variables

Another major variable in our study are childcare obligations defined by the number of children in the household below 18 years old ("no kids at all", "no kids below 18 years old", "1 kid below 18 years old", "2+ kids below 18 years old") and the age of the youngest child ("no kids, 0-5 years old", "6-13 years old", "14-18 years old" and "19+ years old"). We also include variables that characterise couples as cohabitation status ("married couple"; "cohabitation"), relationship parity ("1st relationship", "2nd or further relationship"), and duration of the relationship ("0-2 years", "3-5 years", "6-10 years", "11+ years"). In addition, we control for variables measuring partners' education based on ISCED classification ("upper secondary or below"; "tertiary"; "missings"), household equalised income (household income divided by the square root of the household size) grouped in three categories ("low income"- 1st tertile, "middle income" - 2nd tertile, "high income" -3rd tertile) and work characteristics like occupation based on ISCO classification ("managers and professionals"; "technicians and clerical support workers"; "other occupations"; "not working"), and type of contract ("full-time"; "part-time"; "not working"). We also include controls for region ("East Germany; "West Germany"), nationality ("German"; "European"; "other"), and age group ("less than 25"; "26-30"; "31-35"; "36-40"; "41-45"; "46+).

3.4. Method

We perform an event history analysis of the risk of dissolution using mixed-effect complementary log-log (cloglog) models for the transitions to union dissolution, separation or divorce without separation. The observations are clustered on the couple level. All explanatory variables connected to work characteristics are lagged by one year compared to the response variable to capture the situation from before dissolution.

We perform our analysis in two steps. First, we examine the basic effect of working-time flexibility of female and male partners on the risk of union dissolution, net of all control variables listed above. We further assess flexibility interactions with parental status and the age of the youngest child. This allows us to investigate how female and male partners' working time arrangements are associated with union stability and whether this relationship is different by gender and in couples with childcare obligations. Secondly, we investigate the interaction between men's working-time flexibility and women's employment status in order to examine whether the effect of male partners' working arrangements differs in dual-earner and male-breadwinner family models. Unfortunately, the small number of cases did not allow us to

conduct this analysis for female-breadwinner couples. In order to interpret our findings, we compute predicted probabilities of union dissolution by partners' working time arrangements and presence of children/age of the youngest child. We next assess differences between the categories of interest by comparing confidence intervals for pairwise comparisons. It has been established in the literature that the differences between two predicted probabilities should be considered significant at α=0.05 level if the 83% confidence intervals do not overlap (Austin & Hux, 2002; Knol et al., 2011).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics

In our sample, 67,2% of respondents live in dual-earner couples, 24,7% in couples with one nonworking partner (23,8% are couples with a non-working woman) and 8% in couples in which none of neither partners work for pay. Among respondents who work for pay, men are more likely than women to have employee-oriented flexibility (46% vs. 36%), whereas women more often have no flexibility at all (41% vs. 35%) (Table 1). Employee-oriented flexibility is concentrated among tertiary-educated workers and those in managerial or professional roles, particularly among men: nearly half (47%) of men with such flexibility have a tertiary education, and 53% are managers or professionals, compared with 39% and 35%, respectively, for women. Among women, employee-oriented flexibility is more common among full-time than part-time workers, but for men—most of whom work full-time—no such difference is observed. Employer-oriented flexibility is less prevalent among the tertiary educated and high-status occupations than employee-oriented flexibility, yet it remains more common than having no flexibility at all. The absence of flexibility is most frequent among workers with lower education and in lower-status occupations, for both women and men.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics: distribution of selected workers' characteristics within certain flexibility type by gender (%)

Gender	Characteristic		No flexibility	Employer-oriented	Employee-oriented
Women	Educational level	Tertiary education	19.8	24.7	38.7
		Low/medium education	80.2	75.3	61.3
	Occupation	Managers/professionals	17.7	21.5	34.9
		Other occupations	82.3	78.5	65.1

Gender	Characteristic		No flexibility	Employer-oriented	Employee-oriented
	Type of contract	Full-time	37.7	34.9	45.6
		Part-time	62.3	65.1	54.4
	Total		**40.9**	**22.9**	**36.2**
Men	Educational level	Tertiary education	13.6	19.1	47.1
		Low/medium education	86.4	80.9	52.9
	Occupation	Managers/professionals	17	21.1	53
		Other occupations	83	78.9	47
	Type of contract	Full-time	94.6	90	92.8
		Part-time	5.4	10	7.2
	Total		**34.8**	**19**	**46.2**

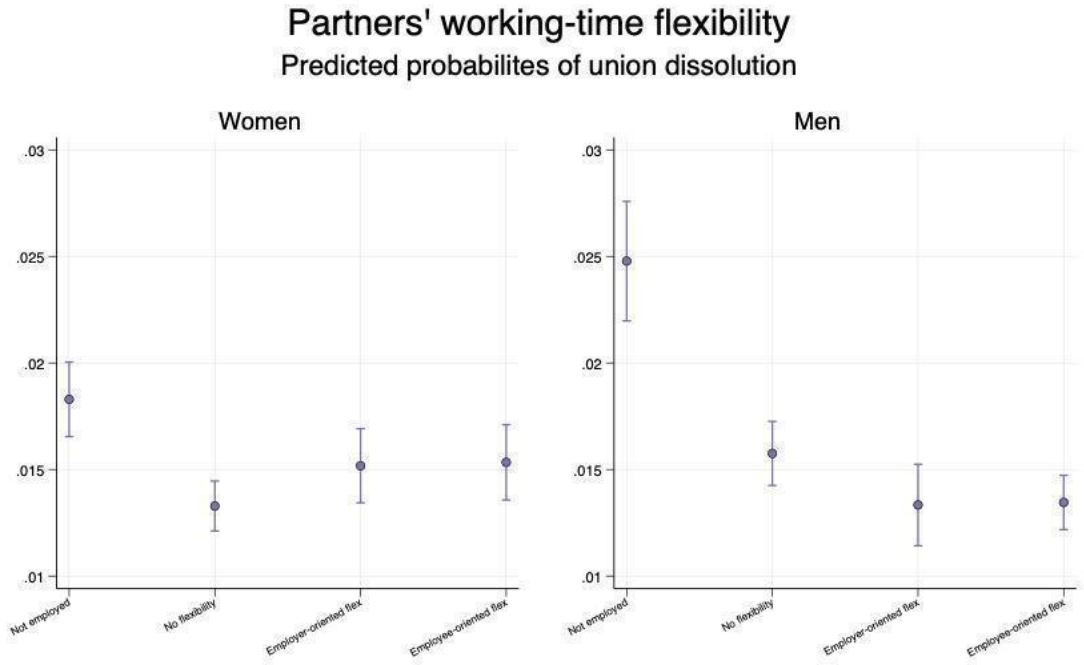
Source: Own calculations based on analyses sample from GSOEP.

Note: Table restricted to couples from the sample with employed women and men where information about type of working schedule is not missing.

4.2. *Women's and men's working-time flexibility*

In this and the following section, we present results from our basic models examining the associations between female and male partners' working time flexibility and their risk of union dissolution. We visualise the predicted probabilities of partnership dissolution in Figure 1-3. Interestingly, for both genders, non-employment is consistently associated with the highest risk of union dissolution. Those who are employed - regardless of their working-time flexibility - tend to experience a lower risk of union dissolution compared to non-employed individuals, although for women this effect reached statistical significance only for those with no flexibility. At the same time, we found that differences in dissolution risk across working-time flexibility types are minimal and not statistically significant for either gender, indicating that individual flexibility arrangements alone do not substantially influence union stability.

Figure 1. Working-time flexibility and union dissolution - gender differences

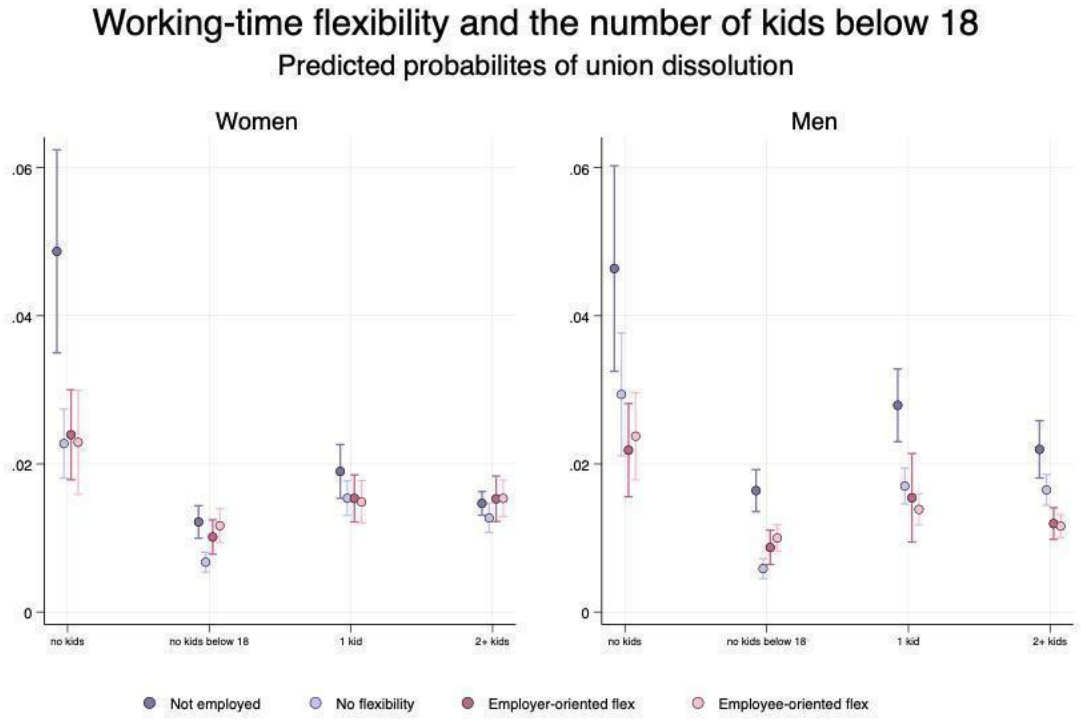


Note: Predicted probabilities of union dissolution with 83% CI estimated from the model that consists of women's and men's working characteristics separately.

4.3. Working-time flexibility and union dissolution in the context of childcare obligations

We now examine whether flexible working arrangements are associated with union dissolution differently based on the number of dependent children (below 18 years old) (Figure 2). Women's flexibility is not related to union dissolution, regardless of the number of children the couple has. Men's flexibility, in turn, is related to union dissolution, but only for couples with at least two dependent children. In these couples, the risk of union dissolution is significantly lower when the male partner has employee-oriented flexibility. Surprisingly, couples with at least two children also have a lower risk of union dissolution if the male partner has employer-oriented flexibility compared to those with fixed schedules, although this result is only marginally significant. This suggests that both types of fathers' working-time flexibility, and in particular employee-oriented flexibility, relate to a lower probability of union dissolution in larger families with children below 18. Interestingly, couples in which men have employee-oriented flexibility appear more likely to experience dissolution once their children reach adulthood (18 or older).

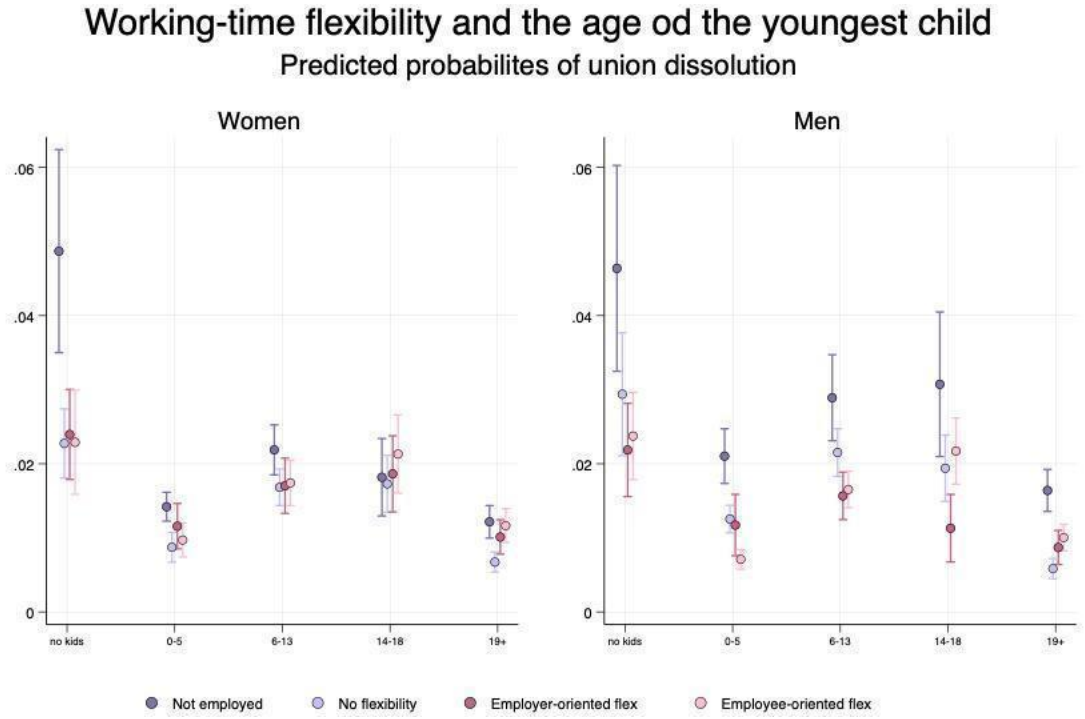
Figure 2. Working-time flexibility and union dissolution - differences in parental status



Note: Predicted probabilities of union dissolution with 83% CI estimated from the model that consists of women's and men's working characteristics separately.

The analysis by the age of the youngest child indicates that women's working-time flexibility does not affect union stability, regardless of the child's age. Men with employee-oriented flexibility, in turn, are less likely to experience union dissolution than those on fixed schedules but only among couples with young children (ages 5 or younger) (Figure 3). This finding adds dimension to our previous results - men's employee-oriented working time flexibility is associated with a lower probability of dissolution among couples with intense childcare obligations, i.e. couples with two or more children, as well as couples with pre-school children. Moreover, the association between men's employee-oriented flexibility and union stability is no longer evident in couples with older children, and turns negative in couples with adult children (aged 19 and above). The latter finding means that men with children aged 19+ who have employee-oriented flexibility are more likely to experience union dissolution than those with fixed schedules.

Figure 3. Working-time flexibility and union dissolution - differences in the age of the youngest child



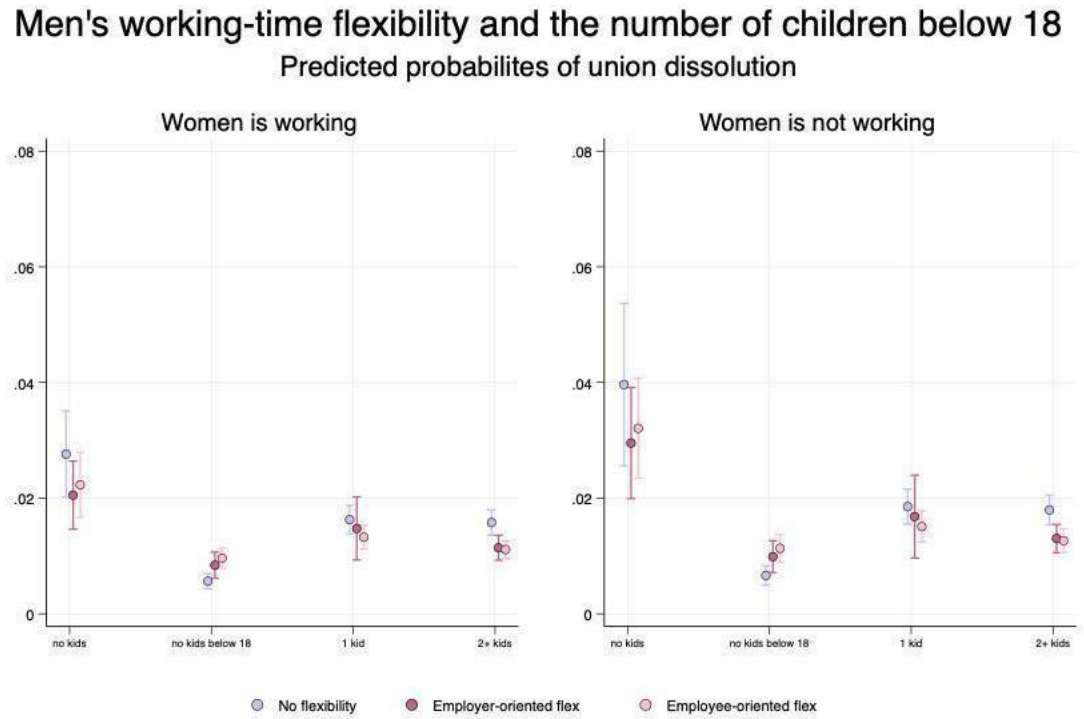
Note: Predicted probabilities of union dissolution with 83% CI estimated from the model that consists of women's and men's working characteristics separately.

4.4. Men's working-time flexibility and union dissolution in dual earner versus single earner couples

Because we expected employer-oriented flexibility to be particularly detrimental to union stability—and employee-oriented flexibility either beneficial or disadvantageous — in dual-earner couples with childcare responsibilities, we compare the association between male partners' flexibility and union stability in dual-earner versus male-breadwinner couples (Figure 3 and Figure 4). We do not include female breadwinner couples as there were too few in our sample for a meaningful analysis (see *Descriptive Statistics* section).

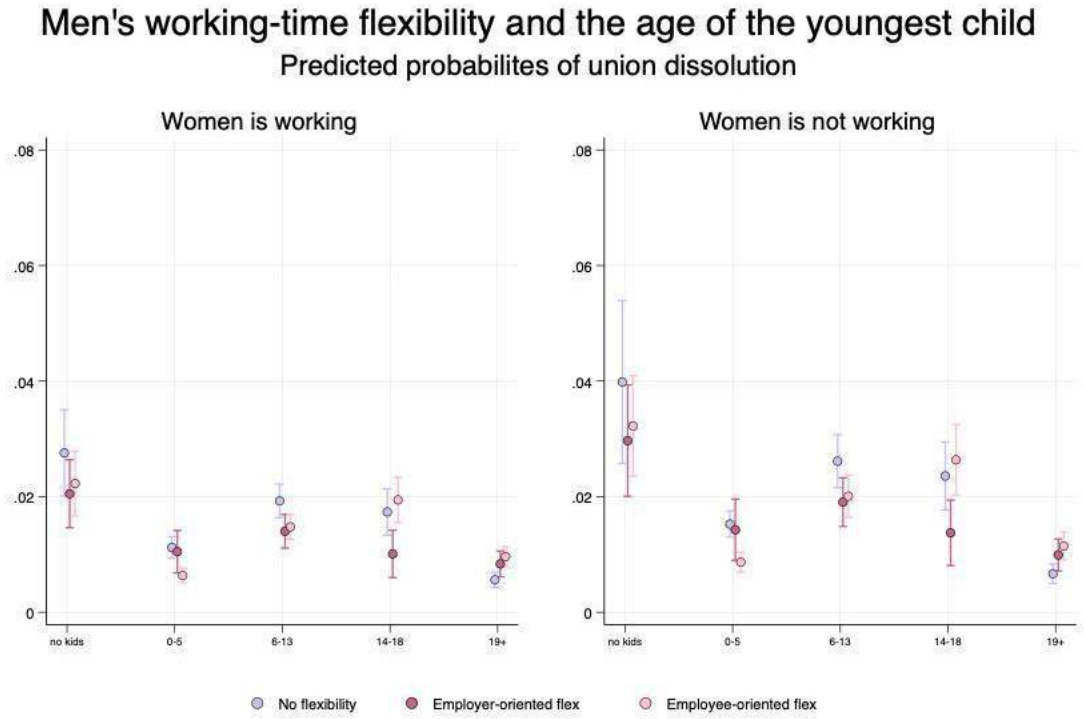
Regardless of couple type or childcare responsibilities, couples with 2 or more children in which the man has employer-oriented flexibility are still less likely to separate than those in which he has no flexibility, yet this difference is only barely significant. Furthermore, couples in which the man has employee-oriented flexibility are least likely to dissolve when the couple has 2 or more children or they are aged five or younger, regardless of whether the female partner works for pay or not. This finding indicated that the stabilising effect of men's control over work schedule holds across both male breadwinner and dual-earner family arrangements. However, this pattern reverses once children reach adulthood, when such couples are the most likely to separate, irrespective of the woman's employment status.

Figure 4. Men's working-time flexibility and union dissolution - differences by women's employment status and number of children before 18



Note: Predicted probabilities of union dissolution with 83% CI estimated from the model that consists of the interaction between men's working characteristics and women's employment.

Figure 5. Men's working-time flexibility and union dissolution - differences by women's employment status and the age of the youngest child



Note: Predicted probabilities of union dissolution with 83% CI estimated from the model that consists of the interaction between men's working characteristics and women's employment.

4.5. Robustness checks

We performed several robustness tests to verify the stability of our findings (Appendix, Table A1). Firstly, we checked the results in the sample of married couples solely, as in the German context, a significant amount of cohabiting couples are married and they can differ from not registered cohabitation. We found one difference that among only married couples, the women's employee-oriented flexibility significantly increases the probability of divorces, yet the coefficients are consistent with previous results. Secondly, we reduced the sample to only couples where both partners possess German nationality, as, starting from wave 2016, a substantial number of migrants were added to the respondents' pool. In this sample, men's employer-oriented flexibility relates significantly to a lower probability of divorce, yet again, the coefficients are consistent with previous results. The emergence of significance is most likely driven by more homogeneous characteristics of workers with German nationality in terms of a higher share of managers and professionals among them. No further differences were observed in the analyses by number of children and age of the youngest child. Thirdly, the information about working-time flexibility was missing in some waves, so we made imputations of missing data using the information based on the question of whether the person changed jobs. To assess how much the imputed values on a selected sample of occupation-stable workers can impact our results, we limited the sample to the waves with the flexibility information and ran the model. We didn't observe any significant changes between models with or without imputation, and the results of the main explanatory variable remained similar.

5. Conclusions

Partners' working schedules play a critical role in shaping the organisation of personal and family life, which may have important implications for relationships quality and stability. Although many studies have focused on non-standard working conditions (R. Donnelly, 2020; Kalil et al., 2010; Mills & Täht, 2010; Presser, 2000), much less attention has been given to emerging forms of flexible schedules. This gap is crucial, as globalisation and the rapid spread of new technologies have reshaped the labour market, leading to major shifts in working conditions (Stromquist, 2019), including the substantial rise of working-time flexibility (Bryan & Sevilla, 2017). The new flexible working arrangements have much potential to influence how couples organise family life, share domestic and caregiving obligations, and allocate leisure time (Chung & van der Horst, 2020; Fernández-Iturrate et al., 2022; French et al., 2022). Flexibility can take different forms. Employee-oriented flexibility—where individuals control

the scheduling of their work—offers an opportunity to adapt working hours to personal and family needs. Employer-oriented flexibility—where schedules are variable and mostly imposed by the employer—can create unpredictability and limit workers' control over their time. Although there is evidence that non-standard schedules or atypical hours affect union dissolution (Donnelly, 2020; Kalil et al., 2010; Presser, 2000), relatively little is known about how these two distinct types of flexibility, especially when considering both female and male partners' characteristics, relate to union stability.

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between men's and women's working-time flexibility and union dissolution, distinguishing between employee-oriented and employer-oriented flexibility. We stratified the analysis by couples' parental characteristics such as the number of children and the age of the youngest child, recognising that coordination of paid and unpaid work differs substantially between parents and non-parents (Scheffel, 2010; Täht & Mills, 2012). Drawing on the Job Demands–Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007), we expected that employer-oriented flexibility of any partner would be particularly disruptive for unions—especially dual-earner couples with children—because it introduces unpredictability, disrupts routines, and complicates coordination of family life. By contrast, we anticipated more ambiguous effects for employee-oriented flexibility: whereas it can facilitate the reconciliation of work and family life, it may also blur work–family boundaries, contribute to work intensification, and reduce shared couple time if the partner with a flexible schedule takes over childcare, whereas the other works for pay.

Our findings reveal a striking gender asymmetry. Women's working-time flexibility—whether employee- or employer-oriented—showed no significant association with union stability, even among couples with young children. The absence of effects for women is notable, particularly for employer-oriented flexibility, which we expected to destabilise unions. One possible explanation is that this type of flexibility is relatively uncommon among women with children (Kałamucka et al., 2025), which implies that our findings may be biased by selection and/or insufficient statistical power. The fact that women's employee-oriented flexibility plays no role in union stability is less surprising. In this case, the potential benefits of employee-oriented flexibility for mothers, such as the opportunity to organise working time around family obligations, may be offset by its costs as identified in prior research: increased mental load, difficulty disengaging from paid work or focusing on professional career, and heightened psychological distress when high work autonomy coincides with significant care responsibilities (Gilbert-Ouimet et al., 2019)

For men, the patterns are markedly different. Our findings underscore the positive role of male partners' employee-oriented flexibility in supporting relationship stability, especially in families with young children or with two or more adolescent children. In this context, employee-oriented flexibility of the father can facilitate the coordination of childcare responsibilities, contributing to more stable relationships. Importantly, we found similar stabilising effects of this flexibility in both dual-earner and male-breadwinner couples. This suggests that the advantage of flexible working hours is not only a matter of time coordination between working partners but also encompasses the potential to offer respite-oriented support to a non-working partner. Our results align with prior findings showing a positive association between men's varying or flexible working hours leading to greater marital happiness (Amato et al., 2008) and relationship stability (Cooke & Gash, 2010).

However, this positive association between men's employee-oriented flexibility and union stability appears to shift once children reach adulthood. Among couples whose children are all over 18, men's employee-oriented flexibility is associated with a higher probability of union dissolution. This suggests that the protective role of schedule flexibility is context-dependent - serving as a relationship-supporting resource primarily during the active child-rearing phase, when greater schedule control enables male partners to contribute more effectively to daily caregiving and household responsibilities. In this period, such flexibility may foster cooperation, reduce stress, and support a more equitable division of labour, all of which are linked to higher relationship satisfaction and stability. However, once children reach adulthood and caregiving needs diminish, the relevance of such flexibility may decline. In some cases, it may even introduce new tensions - particularly if it leads to diverging expectations around time use, larger involvement in paid work by the male partner, or mismatched schedules - thereby limiting shared couple time and potentially undermining relational cohesion in later stages of family life.

Contrary to our expectations, despite a substantial body of research emphasising the destabilising effects of uncertain non-standard schedules on union dissolutions (Donnelly, 2020; Kalil et al., 2010), our findings show that employer-oriented flexibility, which is similarly characterised by unpredictability and limited employee control over time, does not significantly increase the risk of union dissolution compared to fixed schedules. One possible explanation is that this finding is driven by high-status couples, in which men with employer-oriented flexibility work in high managerial positions. In this case, employer-oriented flexibility is related to men's increased job commitment but also higher income and improved professional

prospects, thereby enhancing couples' financial security (Lott & Chung, 2016). Unfortunately, our sample is too small and does not allow us to test this explanation. Taken together, our findings offer a novel and important perspective by highlighting the need to consider men's working conditions - alongside women's - as a key factor in understanding union stability. Whereas previous studies have primarily examined women's work schedules as a factor influencing relationship outcomes, men's working-time arrangements - particularly distinguishing employee- and employer-oriented flexibility - have been comparatively overlooked. Yet our results, consistent with Mills and Täht (2010), suggest that men's work schedule conditions may have an even stronger association with union stability than women's. This challenges the prevailing notion that flexible work arrangements are primarily intended to support mothers and highlights the need for future research to systematically address how men's employment conditions affect family life. From a policy perspective, these findings point to the critical importance of designing family-friendly work environments that support both parents, not only to reduce work–family conflict, but also to foster more stable and resilient partnerships.

The study is not without limitations. One of the most important is the potential coexistence of both types of flexibility, especially among higher-educated, highly skilled workers, e.g. in managerial positions where employer-oriented flexibility is often accompanied by employee-oriented flexibility (Goldin, 2021; Green et al., 2022; Kaduk et al., 2019). In the GSOEP questionnaire, respondents may subjectively identify a single dominant type of flexibility, which may lead to measurement bias by obscuring important distinctions between individuals who experience both types and those who experience only one. A more nuanced measure - such as that used in the 2019 Labour Force Survey ad hoc module on working conditions (see e.g. Kałamucka et al., 2025), which separates questions on employee- and employer-driven flexibility - would allow for a more accurate assessment of workers' control over their schedules, an important dimension that remains unobserved in our study.

The study would also benefit from a larger sample size and a greater number of observed union dissolutions, which would allow for more detailed and statistically robust subgroup analyses. For example, with more cases, we could separately examine union stability in male-breadwinner, female-breadwinner, and dual-earner couples, as well as explore potential heterogeneity across different socioeconomic groups. Future research should investigate the mechanisms underlying the gendered effects observed here. For women, one should investigate why flexibility—of either type—does not appear to influence dissolution risk. For men, one could ask whether the observed protective effect of employee-oriented flexibility

among couples with intense childcare obligations is due to greater support provided by men to their female partners, reduced work-family tensions or improved couple time. Mediation analysis on larger samples or qualitative studies could shed more light on these dynamics.

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Annexes

Table A1. *Robustness checks*

VARIABLES	**Main analysis** hazard ratio	**Only married** hazard ratio	**Only German nationality** hazard ratio	**Flexibility without imputation** hazard ratio
Working-time flexibility (ref. fixed)				
MEN				
Not working	0.94	0.95	0.81	1.07
	(0.16)	(0.19)	(0.14)	(0.22)
Employer-oriented flexibility	0.85	0.80	0.78**	0.90
	(0.11)	(0.14)	(0.09)	(0.14)
Employee-oriented flexibility	0.85	0.87	0.86	0.88
	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.11)
Working but no info. about flexibility	0.78	0.65**	0.78	
	(0.12)	(0.12)	(0.13)	
WOMEN				
Not working	1.21	1.13	1.26*	1.24
	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.16)	(0.20)
Employer-oriented flexibility	1.14	1.03	1.17	1.17
	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.13)	(0.14)
Employee-oriented flexibility	1.16	1.22*	1.16	1.17
	(0.13)	(0.14)	(0.13)	(0.16)
Working but no info. about flexibility	1.35**	1.32	1.39**	
	(0.21)	(0.25)	(0.22)	
Age of the youngest child (ref. 0-5)				
6-13	1.72***	1.66***	1.85***	1.63***
	(0.18)	(0.21)	(0.19)	(0.20)
14 -18	1.77***	1.71***	1.87***	1.96***
	(0.25)	(0.30)	(0.27)	(0.34)
Number of kids below 18 (ref.no kids)				
No kids or they are more than 18	0.89	0.86	0.91	1.09
	(0.13)	(0.15)	(0.14)	(0.20)
1 kid	0.70**	0.73	0.66***	0.77
	(0.10)	(0.15)	(0.10)	(0.14)
2 or more kids	0.60***	0.62**	0.63***	0.72*
	(0.09)	(0.12)	(0.10)	(0.12)
Education (ref. secondary or below)				
MEN				
Tertiary	0.93	0.87	0.92	0.96
	(0.14)	(0.10)	(0.14)	(0.20)
Missing	2.50	0.65	2.66	0.35*
	(1.58)	(0.50)	(1.67)	(0.22)
WOMEN				
Tertiary	0.79**	0.87	0.72***	0.83
	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.08)	(0.11)
Missing	0.40**		0.44*	0.53
	(0.17)		(0.19)	(0.23)
Type of contract (ref. part-time)				
MEN				

VARIABLES	**Main analysis** hazard ratio	**Only married** hazard ratio	**Only German nationality** hazard ratio	**Flexibility without imputation** hazard ratio
Full time	0.83	0.74*	0.74**	0.90
	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.11)	(0.15)
WOMEN				
Full time	1.09	1.30**	1.10	1.28**
	(0.12)	(0.15)	(0.12)	(0.15)
Occupation (ref. other)				
MEN				
managers and professionals	1.14	1.03	1.09	1.11
	(0.16)	(0.14)	(0.15)	(0.20)
technicians and clerical support workers	1.09	1.16	1.07	1.05
	(0.10)	(0.13)	(0.10)	(0.13)
WOMEN				
managers and professionals	1.20	1.06	1.19	1.09
	(0.18)	(0.16)	(0.18)	(0.16)
technicians and clerical support workers	1.13	0.99	1.12	1.14
	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.14)
Household income (ref. low income- 1st tertile) in square root equivalence scale				
Middle income (2nd tertile)	0.68***	0.66***	0.71***	0.67***
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.09)
High income (3rd tertile)	0.53***	0.59***	0.58***	0.48***
	(0.07)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.09)
Not applied	1.19	0.88	1.27	1.16
	(0.22)	(0.18)	(0.25)	(0.24)
Region (ref. West Germany)				
East Germany	1.04	0.99	1.07	1.04
	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.12)
Relationship parity (ref. 1st relationship with cohabiting partner)				
2nd or subsequent relationship	1.08	0.96	1.08	1.07
	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.11)	(0.12)
Relationship length (ref. up to 2 years)				
3-5	0.87	0.79**	0.87	0.77**
	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.09)
5-10	0.81	0.84	0.72***	0.67**
	(0.11)	(0.13)	(0.08)	(0.11)
11+	0.66***	0.68***	0.61***	0.56***
	(0.08)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.08)
Type of relationship (ref. married)				
Cohabitation	2.40***		2.36***	2.39***
	(0.20)		(0.19)	(0.26)
Age WOMEN(ref. 18-25)				
26-30	1.02	0.79	0.96	0.88
	(0.20)	(0.25)	(0.20)	(0.20)
31-35	0.77	0.69	0.78	0.61**
	(0.13)	(0.20)	(0.14)	(0.12)

VARIABLES	**Main analysis** hazard ratio	**Only married** hazard ratio	**Only German nationality** hazard ratio	**Flexibility without imputation** hazard ratio
36-40	0.70*	0.61*	0.72*	0.54***
	(0.13)	(0.18)	(0.14)	(0.11)
41-45	0.59***	0.49**	0.61**	0.47***
	(0.11)	(0.15)	(0.12)	(0.10)
46+	0.50***	0.42***	0.51***	0.40***
	(0.10)	(0.13)	(0.10)	(0.09)
Nationality (ref. German)				
Other European	0.79	0.79		0.86
	(0.159)	(0.20)		(0.21)
Outside of Europe	0.45***	0.35***		0.35***
	(0.13)	(0.11)		(0.12)
	(.)	**(.)**	**(.)**	**(.)**
Constant	0.04***	0.05***	0.04***	0.04***
	(0.01)	(0.02)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Observations	91,550	78,217	79,967	63,774

Note: Robust seeform in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

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