

ERC Starting Grant 2023
Research proposal [Part B1]
(Part B1 is evaluated both in Step 1 and Step 2,
Part B2 is evaluated in Step 2 only)

Social Inequalities in Work-Family Strategies Within and Across 24 Industrialized Countries

WeEqualize

Cover Page:

- Léa Pessin
- GENES
- 60 months

The gender revolution framework predicts a seemingly linear progression leading to a dramatic convergence in men's and women's roles in paid work and at home. Yet gender convergence appears stalled by conflicting structural and cultural factors across industrialized countries. Existing theoretical perspectives fail to simultaneously predict how the gender revolution shapes couple-level work-family patterns across countries and time for those with lower, middle, and higher socio-economic resources.

WeEqualize will address the intertwined implications of the gender revolution—including changing gender beliefs, rising labor market insecurity, and the increasing retreat from partnerships—in shaping social inequalities in work-family strategies among different-sex couples across 24 countries from the 1960s to nowadays.

WeEqualize will provide the first comprehensive characterization and quantification of social inequalities in work-family strategies across industrialized countries and over the long run. It aims to: identify a couple-level typology of work-family strategies; examine the prevalence of these strategies by education and across countries; evaluate the role of contextual factors in shaping work-family strategies; assess how historical and contemporary estimates of work-family strategies are shaped by changing demographic trends, and project future trends in work-family strategies for the coming decades; as well as collect and leverage new survey-based experimental data across different contexts to disentangle the role of gender beliefs from labor market constraints in shaping what type of work-family strategies couples choose and why.

By combining innovative computational methods with multiple nationally representative studies, as well as collecting new survey-experimental data, WeEqualize will challenge and reframe our theoretical understanding of how gender equality progresses within and across families now and in the future.

No secondary panel indicated.

Section a: Extended Synopsis of the scientific proposal (max. 5 pages, references do not count towards the page limits)

WeEqualize will address the intertwined implications of the gender revolution—including changing gender beliefs, rising labor market insecurity, and the increasing retreat from partnerships—in shaping social inequalities in work-family strategies among different-sex couples across countries and time. WeEqualize proposes a new theoretical framework to identify and disentangle the distinct and changing drivers of work-family strategies by couples' education and across 24 industrialized countries. This framework will identify barriers and solutions to gender inequality within partnerships. To realize my ambitious goal, WeEqualize is organized around five aims that will structure the project and the remainder of the proposal. I will describe each aim and highlight what unresolved questions each aim will address.

Aim 1. To identify a multidimensional couple-level typology of work-family strategies, i.e., the most common patterns of division of paid work, housework, and carework among different-sex couples, across time and country-contexts. *How much is gender inequality within couples understated by the lack of a couple-level approach? What are the typical strategies that couples adopt to reconcile their time between paid and unpaid work? What is the prevalence of egalitarian couples and how much does it vary across time and countries?*

Aim 2. To examine how work-family strategies vary by couples' education attainment across time and country-contexts, with an emphasis on the middle of the education distribution by distinguishing between differentially educated couples, in which either the man or the woman is college-educated but their partner is not. *How socially stratified are couples' work-family strategies? Are highly educated couples more likely than their less educated counterparts to challenge or reinforce traditional gender responsibilities? How do gender and education intersect in shaping work-family strategies?*

Aim 3. To evaluate how the prevalence of different work-family strategies by couples' education varies across country-context and over time, focusing on the moderating roles of gender beliefs, work-family policies, and labor market insecurity as key dimensions of contextual variation. *How do contextual factors differentially shape work-family strategies by couples' educational attainment? What country settings are associated with greater gender inequality within couples and across educational groups?*

Aim 4. To assess how historical and contemporary estimates of work-family strategies are shaped by changing demographic trends (i.e., the demographic composition of the partnered population) across time and countries using demographic microsimulation models, which will then be used to make grounded projections of future changes in work-family strategies across context. *How does increasing selection into partnership contribute to the prevalence of different work-family strategies? Are increases toward gender equality driven by actual behavioral change or the result of opting out of partnership when gender equality cannot be attained? How much change should we expect in work-family strategies in the upcoming decades?*

Aim 5. To disentangle the role of gender beliefs from labor market constraints in shaping what type of work-family strategies couples choose by collecting novel survey-based experimental data across different country contexts. *What is the causal effect of labor market constraints on cultural norms toward work-family strategies? How do education and gender shape cultural work-family norms when addressing the risk of social desirability bias? How much do these findings vary across country-contexts?*

By combining innovative statistical methods with multiple nationally representative studies as well as collecting new survey-experimental data, WeEqualize will challenge and reframe our theoretical understanding of how gender equality progresses within families and across educational groups now and in the future. WeEqualize will combine multiple sources of data for 24 countries across Europe, North America, and East Asia & Pacific from the 1960s to nowadays. The outcomes of WeEqualize have major **implications for our understanding the unequal effects of work-family policies and labor market inequalities in shaping the work-family lives of couples** within and across countries.

STATE OF THE ART

Since the 1960s, women's workforce participation has increased rapidly, especially among married women and of young children across industrialized countries^{1,2}. The gender gap has narrowed across several life

domains, such as housework, childcare, and most notably education, in which women have overtaken men across all education levels³⁻⁵. In parallel, across industrialized countries, a growing majority voices preferences for egalitarian partnerships, in which each partner is equally involved in labor inside and outside the home⁶⁻⁹. These patterns are consistent with theories that posit “phases” of the gender revolution^{10,11}. Specifically, they indicate that industrialized countries are entering the second phase of the gender revolution, in which egalitarian and stable partnerships should first emerge among the college educated and then become dominant for all¹².

However, this seemingly linear progression is complicated by conflicting structural and cultural factors across educational lines. Disproportionately, those without a college education, especially men, have experienced dramatic increases in employment precarity and unpredictable schedules, and declines in wages¹³⁻¹⁵. These trends have been exacerbated by a shrunken welfare state^{16,17} and varying policy responses to work-family conflicts across industrialized countries^{18,19}. Concurrently, both men and women, and especially the college educated, have become subject to “ideal worker” norms, which imply commitment to one’s job above any other obligations, including family²⁰⁻²². Yet gender norms continue to place women as the household’s primary caregiver and homemaker, and increasingly include pressures to perform “intensive mothering,” which requires spending extensive and structured time in childcare^{23,24}. This raises questions about whether college-education differences in the gendered division of labor emerge because of different preferences toward the allocation of time between paid and unpaid work or because of differentials in constraints placed on workers by employers and labor markets.

There is disagreement in the literature on how these parallel changes in structural and cultural factors have shaped couples’ division of their time between paid work, housework, and childcare. Does the division differ between those with and without college education, and has that difference changed over time? One perspective argues that less educated couples have become more likely to violate traditional gender responsibilities and move toward gender equality because of the greater structural constraints they face in labor markets²⁵⁻²⁹. A counterargument holds that college-educated couples are increasingly more likely to adopt egalitarian practices because they have greater monetary and nonmonetary resources for work-family reconciliation, such as schedule flexibility and control, partnership stability, and outsourcing of domestic and care work^{23,30-34}. Couples who differ in education further complicate this debate, as does the increasing prevalence of couples where the woman is more educated than the man^{35,36}. Thus, how college education shapes couples’ gendered division of labor, and whether its role has changed over time, remains highly contested.

What work-family strategies do couples adopt to divide their time between paid work, housework, and care work? How does the prevalence of these different work-family strategies vary by college education, and across time and countries? Do educational gradients in work-family strategies emerge because of different gender beliefs toward the division of labor or because of differential constraints placed on workers by employers and labor markets? These unanswered questions point to the need for a theoretical framework that addresses how the gender revolution shapes the work-family strategies for those with lower, middle, and higher socio-economic resources and across varied contexts of gender culture and welfare regimes. WeEqualize will contribute to our understanding of why gender inequality is so persistent within different-sex partnerships and under what circumstances may further gender equality progress be achieved in a socially equitable way.

BEYOND THE STATE OF THE ART

WeEqualize proposes **a new theoretical framework to identify and disentangle the distinct drivers of work-family strategies by education**. To do so, WeEqualize will depart from existing literature and make the following innovations:

A Multidimensional and Couple Approach to Work-Family Strategies. Prior research on the gender division of labor has suffered from one or more significant limitations, including, small or non-representative samples; reliance on individual measures of household labor; a lack of focus on the interdependence between paid and unpaid work, and the use of retrospective time use measures. Existing research that focuses only on individual-level measures of household labor may seriously underestimate inequalities within couples and across educational groups because it fails to account for couple dynamics³⁷ (i.e., assortative mating, family structure, and specialization). WeEqualize seeks to address these limitations by conceptualizing and measuring

how couples divide labor as work-family strategies, which are measured at the couple-level, capture multiple dimensions of household labor (paid work, housework, and carework), and focus on variation across couples instead of average tendency. This approach theoretically builds on qualitative and small-N studies, which demonstrate that couples' household labor decisions cluster in multiple configurations rather than a simple dichotomy of traditional vs. egalitarian and emphasizes the need to focus on gender inequality within couples³⁸⁻⁴⁷. **In WeEqualize, I argue that such complexity needs to be translated to and captured in quantitative and nationally representative typologies of work-family strategies so that we can accurately identify, and quantify change toward greater gender equality.**

Challenging The Trickle-Down Approach to Gender Equality. Theories of demographic change primarily assume that the most socially privileged groups in society will be the leaders of social change because of their higher economic resources and value orientations^{10,11,48,49}. Within the gender revolution framework^{10-12,33}, this translates into expecting college-educated couples to be the first to embrace egalitarian work-family strategies, which will then trickle down to less educated couples. Yet this assumption erases the complexity of gender beliefs and employment constraints across the social spectrum. College-educated couples have greater economic ability to outsource housework and childcare and have higher economic and social rewards associated with their employment. Yet they also face the largest gender wage gaps, long and inflexible work hours, and greater pressure to parent intensely –all mechanisms, which could lead to more traditional work-family strategies. These conflicting mechanisms suggest that work-family strategies are likely to vary widely by couples' socioeconomic status, and there is a need to account for this heterogeneity. These mechanisms are further complicated by the middle of education distribution, which has received little theoretical attention², and yet represent a large share of all couples. **By challenging the tricked-down approach to gender equality, WeEqualize will identify the conditions under which change toward gender equality is likely to happen, for whom, and in which context.**

A Comparative Approach to Social Inequalities in Work-Family Strategies. WeEqualize will exploit historical and cross-national contextual variation to understand how structural and cultural constraints intersect in shaping social inequalities in work-family strategies. This approach responds to recent calls for the joint consideration of social class and couple-level dynamics in a comparative setting to understand the unequal consequences of the gender revolution on families^{19,50,51}. Dramatic changes in gender culture and labor markets have unfolded simultaneously since the onset of the gender revolution. Yet the pace and extent of these changes as well as how countries have responded to these changes vary widely across time and countries. These contextual changes are heterogeneous in how they affect the opportunities and constraints that couples hold when reconciling their work and family needs^{50,51}. **By jointly considering variation across country-contexts and education, WeEqualize will address how couples' work-family strategies vary across different dimensions of country contexts, and within countries by couples' education.**

Demographic Change as a Driver of Work-Family Strategies. Research on the gender division of labor focuses on the partnered population only, which is conceptually logical. Yet I argue that a neglected driver of change in work-family strategies is demographic change, and specifically increasing selection into partnership. Across the industrialized world, the share of adults who are not currently partnered and who will never partner has increased dramatically, with no signs of reversal^{48,52,53}. **Understanding whether changes in the prevalence of different work-family strategies is driven by changes in the composition of the partnered population has important implications for substantive explanations of stalled progress toward gender equality.** For example, let us assume that the prevalence of egalitarian couples, i.e., couples of equally divide paid and unpaid work, has tripled from the late 1960s to nowadays across industrialized countries. If this change is primarily driven by demographic change through who gets to find a partner and who stays partnered, then it does not reflect large societal changes toward gender equality but increasing selectivity of partnership.

Causality and Cultural Norms about Work-Family Strategies. Research emphasizes labor market constraints in shaping how couples negotiate their work-family strategies. Yet a critical challenge of this research is to disentangle the extent to which these work-family strategies are caused by structural barriers from labor markets or whether they are deeply rooted in traditional gender beliefs about work and family. Prior research is limited in addressing this question because it relies on in-depth interviews or observational data and thus cannot assess the causal effect of labor market conditions on preferences toward work and family. Yet, this raises the question of whether the adoption of gender-traditional work-family strategies should be

interpreted as failed attempts at gender equality or rather a result of traditional preferences? WeEqualize proposes an innovative and cross-national survey experiment to evaluate **the effect of labor market constraints on cultural norms about work-family strategies**.

SAMPLE AND DATA

Sample. WeEqualize will combine multiple sources of data for countries in industrialized countries across Europe, North America, and East Asia & Pacific from the 1960s to nowadays. The sample is selected based on data availability to best capture variation in welfare regimes^{13,54,55} across three different contextual dimensions: gender beliefs, work-family policies, and labor market inequality (*Conservative*: Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Netherlands; *East Asian*: Beijing/China, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea; *Eastern European*: Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia, *Liberal*: Australia, Canada, United Kingdom; United States; *Social Democratic*: Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden; *Southern European*: Italy, Spain). Historical data coverage will vary across countries but range from 1961 to the most recent available data at the time of analysis.

Work-Family Strategies. WeEqualize will leverage newly harmonized time-use surveys from the Multinational Time Use Study⁵⁶ (MTUS) and the East Asian Time Use Data Harmonization Project⁵⁷ (EATUS), which provide detailed individual measures of paid work, housework, and carework; and for a subsample of countries, couple-level measures of these variables. These data are collected using time diaries, which is the gold standard to measure how people spend their time. Whenever the time-use surveys only collect data for one individual per household and thus preclude couple-level data, I will leverage new statistical methods⁵⁸ to combine individual time-use surveys with couple-level data. Specifically, the couple-level time use measures will come from multiple data sources, including the European Social Surveys - Family, Work and Well-Being (ESS), the Generations and Gender Survey (GGP), the International Social Survey Programme - Family and Changing Gender Roles Module⁵⁹ (ISSP), and ongoing longitudinal surveys for select countries.

Contextual Dimensions. *Gender Beliefs:* The contextual gender beliefs variables will be constructed using a combination of data from the General Social Surveys, the World Values Surveys, and the European Values Studies, as well the ISSP. These measures have been used in recent research^{51,60,61} including my own^{33,62,63}. *Work-Family Policies:* The work-family policy data will primarily come from the OECD family database^{64,65} and be supplemented with national level data for some countries/years (i.e., selected years for Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia; all years for Bulgaria and Taiwan). *Labor Market Insecurity:* I will focus on two different dimensions of labor markets: earnings inequality and employment protection. Both variables will be primarily constructed using OECD Labour database⁶⁶ and be supplemented with national level data for some countries/years (i.e., selected years for Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovenia; all years for Bulgaria and Taiwan).

Data Sources for Demographic Microsimulation. The input parameters (mortality and partnership) for the demographic microsimulation model will primarily come from the United Nations Population Division Data Portal⁶⁷ and be supplemented with country-specific census data when needed. The education data will be based on the Barro-Lee dataset⁶⁸.

Survey Experiments. A highly innovative survey experiment will be carried out across different countries to disentangle the role of gender beliefs from labor market constraints in shaping what type of work-family strategies couples prefer. The selected countries will be selected to maximize contextual variation across gender beliefs, work-family policies, and labor markets.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

To achieve these innovations, I will work together with three postdoctoral researchers across five different aims of WeEqualize. The first aim will use a couple-centered and data-driven methodology to identify and quantify **work-family strategies** across time and country-context. The second aim focuses how **couples' educational attainment and educational pairing** shape how couples are distributed across work-family strategies across time and country-context. Aim 3 will build on Aim 2 and 2 to identify supply constraints to different work-family strategies by exploring how variation in **contextual gender beliefs, work-family policies, and labor market inequality** shape work-family strategies by couples' education. Aim 4 will

disentangle how **demographic compositional change** of the partnered population has contributed to and will continue to contribute to the changing prevalence of different work-family strategies by couples' education. Aim 4 will add to knowledge developed in the previous work streams by disentangling the role of demographic compositional change, and thus demographic processes, from supply constraints in shaping the prevalence of different work-family strategies. Aim 5 will examine how gender beliefs and labor market barriers intersect in shaping **cultural norms** for work-family strategies. Aim 5 will complete the overarching aim of the project by adding to our knowledge of **demand constraints** in explaining the prevalence of different work-family strategies by couple's education.

Aim 1 – Work-Family Strategies: Aim 1 will identify couple-level and multidimensional work-family strategies by using novel statistical methods, the relative density approach⁵⁸ and multi-group latent class analysis^{69,70}, to combine different data sources and inductively identify a typology. (ISSP, ESS, GGP, and longitudinal surveys). The results will provide the first nationally representative estimates of different work-family strategies across time and countries.

Aim 2 – Couples' Educational Attainment and Educational Pairing: Aim 2 examines changes over time and across countries in the patterns of association between couples' work-family strategies and education. I will use the work-family strategies identified in Aim 1 as outcome variables in multinomial logistic regression models with correction for classification uncertainty^{71,72}. These results will shed light on existing theoretical debate on how socially stratified couples' work-family strategies are, and whether greater economic resources foster equality in partnerships, or instead, returns to more traditional divisions of labor.

Aim 3 – Contextual Dimensions: Aim 3 will explore how contextual gender beliefs, work-family policies, and labor market inequalities shape work-family strategies by education across and within countries. Using multilevel models, and building on findings from Aim 1 and 2, I will test how these three contextual dimensions are associated with different work-family strategies by couples' education. These findings will shed lights on how different contextual settings shape social inequalities in the outcomes of the gender revolution.

Aim 4 – Demographic Compositional Change: Aim 4 will assess how much demographic composition of the partnered population shapes changes in the prevalence of different work-family strategies across time and countries. Aim 4 will use the work-family strategies identified in Aim 1 and apply demographic microsimulation models, which will then be used to make grounded projections of future changes in work-family strategies across country-context.

Aim 5 – Cultural Norms about Work-Family Strategies: To disentangle structural constraints from gender preferences, I plan to develop a cross-national survey experiment to test how variation in occupation characteristics shape individual-level work-family ideals across country-contexts.

IMPACT

By combining innovative statistical methods with multiple nationally representative studies as well as collecting new survey-experimental data, WeEqualize will challenge and reframe our theoretical understanding of how gender equality progresses within families and across social strata now and in the future. WeEqualize's outcomes have important **implications for our understanding the heterogeneity in effects of work-family policies and labor market inequalities in shaping the work-family lives of couples** within countries and across contexts. WeEqualize's findings will therefore be relevant for both academic and public debates on gender and social inequalities. Results will be disseminated through two **project workshops, conference presentations, journal publications, workshops, and outreaches to the media**. All research conducted will be **replicable** by third parties: code used for data management and analysis will be made available online and published through **open access**.

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