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Gender equity and fertility intentions in Italy and the Netherlands

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Abstract

Fertility levels have fallen drastically in most industrialized countries. Diverse theoretical and empirical frameworks have had difficulty in explaining these unprecedented low levels of fertility. More recently, however, attention has turned from classic explanations, such as women's increased labour market participation, to gender equity as the essential link to understand this phenomenon. The increase in women's labour market participation did not prompt an increase in men's domestic duties, which is often referred to women's 'dual burden' or 'second shift'. Institutions and policies within countries also facilitate or constrain the combination of women's employment with fertility. This paper provides an empirical test of gender equity theory by examining whether the unequal division of household labour leads to lower fertility intentions of women in different institutional contexts. Italy constitutes a case of high gender inequity, low female labour market participation and the lowest-low fertility. The Netherlands has moderate to low gender inequity, high part-time female labour market participation and comparatively higher fertility. Using data from the 2003 Italian Multipurpose Survey - Family and Social Actors and the 2004/5 Dutch sample from the European Social Survey, a series of logistic regression models test this theory. A central finding is that the unequal division of household labour only has a significant impact on women's fertility intentions when they already carry the load of high paid work hours or children, a finding that is particularly significant for working women in Italy.

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