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## **What are unemployed young Europeans up to? A comparative analysis of gender specific differences in employment commitment**

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What are unemployed young Europeans up to? A comparative analysis of  
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# What are unemployed young Europeans up to?

Torild Hammer  
Helen Russell

A comparative analysis of gender-specific differences in employment commitment<sup>1</sup>

## Worauf sind arbeitslose junge Europäer/innen aus?

Eine vergleichende Analyse von geschlechtsspezifischen Unterschieden der Erwerbsneigung bzw. Beschäftigungsbereitschaft

Der vorliegende Beitrag befasst sich schwerpunktmäßig mit geschlechtsspezifischen Unterschieden in der Erwerbsneigung bzw. Beschäftigungsbereitschaft von arbeitslosen jungen Europäer/innen. Eine Analyse dieser Unterschiede ist aus folgenden Gründen angezeigt: Eine unterschiedlich starke Bindung an Erwerbsarbeit könnte (a) die Chancen auf Wiederbeschäftigung beeinflussen; (b) eine negative Folge von Arbeitslosigkeit sein; und (c) die psychischen Folgen von Arbeitslosigkeit mildern. Geschlechtsspezifische Unterschiede in der Erwerbsneigung bzw. Beschäftigungsbereitschaft prägen daher u. U. entscheidend die Erfahrungen und Entwicklungsverläufe von jungen – männlichen und weiblichen – Arbeitslosen. Ihre Erforschung ist insofern von besonderem Interesse, als die Gruppe der arbeitslosen Jugendlichen in Europa dem höchsten Risiko einer anhaltend hohen Arbeitslosigkeit ausgesetzt ist und aufgrund ihrer schwachen Einbindung in den Arbeitsmarkt häufig im Blickpunkt steht. In unserem Beitrag werden einige ausgewählte Ergebnisse der von 1996–2000 in fünf europäischen Ländern (Deutschland, Finnland, Norwegen, Schweden und Spanien) durchgeführten empirischen Jugendstudie vorgestellt und auf der theoretischen und statistischen Ebene mit jenen strukturellen, kulturellen und psychologischen Faktoren verknüpft, mit deren Hilfe sich geschlechtsspezifisch unterschiedliche Bindungen an Erwerbsarbeit möglicherweise erklären lassen.

### Theoretical approaches to differences in employment commitment

The literature on employment commitment and unemployment may be divided into two different strands:

- (1) The first strand deals with the role played by employment commitment in moderating the impact of unemployment on psychological distress.
- (2) The second strand addresses the interrelationships between unemploy-

ment and employment commitment, i. e. the questions whether unemployment reduces employment commitment and/or whether employment commitment influences employment prospects.

Ad 1)

A number of authors have suggested that a person's *level* of employment commitment will influence the extent to which that person *perceives* unemployment as being psychologically distressing. When they lose their work, persons who define themselves in terms of their employment obviously seem to experience greater distress than those who attach little value to their job. This argument was used to underpin the assumption that there are gender differences in unemployment experience. Such authors as Ashton (1984) and Hakim (1996) argue that women's roles as mothers and homemakers often take precedence over their roles as employees or professionals, and that unemployment consequently poses *no serious threat* to women's identities. A similar line of reasoning is applied to unemployed *youth*, as they have not yet had the chance to develop a strong attachment to their work role.

Arguments emphasising the financial consequences of unemployment for men and women are also based on the assumption that there are *gender differences* in the level of employment commitment. Financial explanations of unemployment experience have a very traditional view of gender roles, assuming that unemployed men – as primary breadwinners – will face greater financial hardship than unemployed women. Hence, we assume that unemployed men will be more motivated than women to re-enter the labour market.

However, there is little support for any general claim about unemployed women being less committed to employment than men. For example, Russell's research in the UK (1996) showed that there was no difference in the employment commitment of *adult* unemployed men and women. Gallie and Alm (2000) extended these findings to the EU by stating that unemployed women had even higher levels of employment commitment than unemployed men in all EU Member States except Belgium, West Germany, Ireland and Portugal. Similarly, in the case of unemployed youth, the empirical support for the assumptions underlying the financial argument for a lower employment commitment of women has been shown to be

weak. Analysing the financial situation of unemployed youth in six countries, Hammer and Julkunen (2003) found that young unemployed women reported higher levels of deprivation and a lower disposable income in all European countries than young unemployed men.

There is, however, evidence that in more restricted groups and contexts unemployed women record lower levels of employment deprivation and lower work involvement than unemployed men. Russell and Barbieri (2000) found that women with very demanding care commitments (i. e. children under age six) or traditional views of gender roles had significantly lower levels of perceived employment deprivation than unemployed men. Malmberg-Heimonen and Julkunen (2000) found that (above all in Norway, Denmark and Scotland) unemployed young women with children were less involved in gainful work than young men with children and had less negative attitudes to unemployment.

Ad 2)

As mentioned above, the question of whether the experience of unemployment affects the level of employment commitment is the key topic of the second strand of pertinent literature. The views on this issue are very divided. Representatives of theories of the »underclass« and the »culture of dependency/poverty« (cf. Murray 1990) often argue that prolonged unemployment erodes the commitment to paid work, especially among youth. Other studies (cf. Carle 1987) suggest that young unemployed people may form their own social networks within the groups of unemployed youth. These seem to develop their own culture – a subculture that rejects the norms and values of society – implying a devaluation of work. Jackson et al. (1983) come to similar conclusions when arguing that unemployed young people may re-evaluate the importance of employment in their lives as a method of coping with the lack or loss of adequate jobs.

Other social scientists have suggested a different relation between unemployment and levels of employment commitment. Jahoda (1982), for example, has argued that a spell of unemployment will highlight the importance and centrality of employment in a person's life, and therefore lead to an increase in employment commitment. This position has received empirical support by Gallie and Alm (op. cit.) who found that unemployed young people were as

committed to work as those in jobs. They even showed higher levels of non-financial employment commitment than those currently in work. There is also the study by Banks and Ullah (1988) who found a higher level of employment commitment among unemployed youth than among those in employment during the 1980s.

While the balance of research evidence supports the hypothesis that the level of employment commitment increases with unemployment, this evidence is less consistent for young people and therefore requires further empirical investigation. Despite their conflicting conclusions, both arguments tend to assume that there is an invariant effect of a person's unemployment status on his/her level of employment commitment. However, the measured impact of unemployment may depend on structural and/or institutional factors prevailing within certain societies. For instance, it has been argued by Marsh and Alvaro (1990) that the level of unemployment in a country will influence employment commitment of both men and women. Still, in areas of high unemployment, there might be a general decline in the work ethic, since fewer stigmas might be attached to unemployment when it is a general condition of life. High levels of unemployment may also accentuate the gender differences by strengthening traditional role expectations.

Besides, overall unemployment/employment conditions may lead to different *selection effects*. In periods or areas of rather high employment, the people who remain unemployed are likely to have the least favourable qualifications (including low employment commitment). In contrast, in a situation of *high unemployment*, individual characteristics probably play a secondary role compared to the structural conditions. This means a weaker distinction between employed and unemployed (or inactive) groups in terms of their personal characteristics (such as their employment commitment).

Employment commitment may also vary according to the support for female labour-market participation in countries with different welfare regimes (cf. Gallie and Paugam 2000). The type of welfare-state regime is important because it reflects the nature of gender relations and the norms and expectations about gender roles within the respective society. Such specific elements of the welfare state as eligibility rules, level of benefits and access to services are also likely to have a direct impact on the lives of the unemployed women and men, as

they may influence the level of financial hardship they suffer and lead to gender differences in experiences and behaviour. We may also expect that in countries with strong support for employed motherhood, having children will not affect women's employment commitment in the same way as in countries without such support.

## Design of our European youth study

### Selected countries

Because of the above mentioned variety of objective and subjective factors, gender differences in employment commitment among *unemployed* youth have to be analysed in a comparative framework. In our empirical study, five European countries were selected: Germany, Spain, Norway, Sweden and Finland. They were chosen to provide contrasts in terms of both the *level of unemployment* and of the *gender models* implicit in their respective welfare regimes. Two of these countries (Germany and Spain) represent the traditional *male breadwinner* welfare model. Germany had a relatively low, and Spain an exceptionally high youth unemployment rate at the time of research (1996–2000). The other three countries are examples of the *dual breadwinner* welfare model; two of them (Norway and Sweden) had relatively low youth unemployment, while the rate was relatively high in the third country (Finland).

Table 1 shows the youth unemployment rate for men and women in the five countries along with the general participation rate of women in the respective labour markets. The table shows that there are substantial gender differences in the level of youth unemployment in Spain, where young women have a much higher risk of unemployment than young men. Youth unemployment is more evenly distributed across the sexes in the other countries covered by our study. The general participation rate of women in the labour market is also much lower in Spain and Germany as compared with the three Nordic countries. The proportion of women who work part-time also varies, with very low shares in Finland and Spain.

With respect to welfare-regime models, previous policy analyses suggest that these countries differ in the extent to which their welfare states support traditional *male-breadwinner* household forms and treat women primarily as mothers or workers (cf. Lewis 1992; Daly 1996; Gornick et al. 1997). Within these classifications, the Scandinavian countries are identified as

**The type of welfare-state regime is important because it reflects the nature of gender relations and the norms and expectations about gender roles within the respective society.**

**Table 1: Employment rates for young people and all women in five European countries**

	Youth unemployment rate			Females	Part-time
	Males	Females	Total	Activity rate	(% of employed women)
Finland	25.5	25.0	25.3	72.0	16.9
Norway	10.2	11.1	10.6	76.5	43.2
Sweden	21.6	20.3	21	76.4	36.2
Spain	19.5	33.1	25.5	51.8	17.1
Germany	8.1	7.2	7.7	63.2	37.9
EU15	14.3	17.1	15.6	59.8	33.6

Part-time figures refer to 2000.

Source: OECD 2001

encouraging *male and female breadwinning* through generous leave schemes, individualised tax and benefit systems and the provision of public services, in particular state-subsidised child care. Lewis (op. cit.) argues that Sweden and Denmark seem to provide better support for working mothers than Norway, while Leira (1992) notes that Norway developed public child care and more generous parental leave schemes later than the other Scandinavian countries. Germany is defined as having a strong *male-breadwinner* regime because access to welfare is strongly linked to labour-market participation. This means that the risks covered by the welfare state are mainly male risks, and women's entitlements within the system are primarily as dependents of men (Daly op. cit.). Furthermore, care is largely privatised in the family, and there is relatively little support for working mothers. The tax and benefit system and social services provide greatest support to families that conform to the male-breadwinner/female-carer model (cf. Dingledey 2001). In Spain, however, the large gaps in welfare provision are assumed to be covered by the family. The lack of public involvement in the provision of care means that this responsibility has remained a task of women. The benefits that are available are more strongly linked to labour-market status than to need.

### Empirical data base

Our study draws on the comparative data sets of unemployed youth in Europe funded by the European Commission's Fourth Framework Programme *Youth unemployment and social exclusion in Europe* (cf. Hammer 2003a). For this report, representative samples were drawn from national unemployment registers, with eligible respondents defined as young people (between the ages of 18 and 24) who had been unemployed for a period of at least three months during the last six months. They were interviewed one year later. The total sample in all countries therefore consists of young unemployed people with a variety of work histories who, at the time of the interviews, were located in a wide range of positions inside and outside of the labour market. This survey design makes it possible to compare young people with unemployment experience, some of whom managed to acquire positions in the full-time

labour market, while others re-entered full-time education and yet others remained unemployed, withdrew from the labour market or became marginalised.

In Scandinavia, the surveys were carried out in 1996/97 and were initially based on postal questionnaires. Strategies were designed to minimise any bias due to skewed response rates. Those who failed to respond to the initial questionnaire after having been sent a reminder were interviewed by phone. National register data from the unemployment register was linked to the surveys, enabling us to analyse attrition as well as the reliability and validity of the survey data (cf. Carle/ Julkunen 1998). In Spain and Germany, the data collection was carried out in the years 1999/2000. In Spain, postal questionnaires were used (as in the Scandinavian countries), while in Germany data collection was made by telephone interviews.

To sum up, the study draws on comparative surveys based on representative samples of unemployed 18–24-year-olds who had been continuously unemployed for at least three months and were interviewed 12 months later. The response rates and completed sample sizes in the five countries were as follows: 73 %, n=1,736, in Finland; 56 %, n=1,106, in Norway; 63 %, n=2,534, in Sweden; 65 %, n=1,918, in Germany; and 52 %, n= 2,523, in Spain (cf. Hammer op. cit.).

### Empirical trends

#### a) Effects of the level and persistence of youth unemployment

When considering an individual's employment commitment it is important to take account of that person's current labour market status. While all young people in our study shared a recent experience of unemployment, their employment statuses

differed at the time of interviews. Table 2 summarises the employment status of the respondents in each of the countries. Three main outcomes can be identified as follows:

- employment (including occasional/irregular employment),
- continued unemployment, and
- activities outside the labour market including education, training, full-time domestic duties and military service.

The proportion of young people who had remained unemployed was highest in Finland (42 %) and lowest in Germany (25 %), which is consistent with the divergent levels of youth unemployment in these countries. The share of young people who meanwhile had found jobs was greatest in Spain, where 46 % of the former unemployed respondents were working. Given the high rates of youth unemployment in Spain (as compared to Germany, Norway and Sweden), this result was a surprise. However, Spain has a very high level of temporary work that increases flows into and out of employment. In Spain, only 18 % of the unemployed youth had found a permanent position, the rest were in temporary jobs. The lowest rate of entry into employment was found in Finland, where only 22 % of the respondents had a job at the time of the interview.

The proportion of young people outside the labour market ranged from 27 % in Spain to 47 % in Germany. Their pathways were quite varied: education was the most common pathway for this group, except for Germany, where young people went for job training. Around 4 % of the respondents worked at home, except for Norway, where this share was 9 %.

The figures in Table 2 also show significant *gender differences* in the development of the unemployed. In Finland, Sweden, Germany, and to a lesser extent in Norway, young women were less likely to stay unemployed than young men. In Spain, the situation was reverse, so that a higher proportion of young women remained

unemployed. This reflects the wide divergence between male and female youth unemployment rates recorded in the national statistics for Spain (cf. Table 1). The wide *gender gap* in unemployment in Finland, however, is due to a much higher level of withdrawal from the labour market among young women, compared to young men.

All three Nordic countries have significantly higher rates of *economic inactivity* among young women than among young men. In Sweden and Finland, this is due to higher rates of re-entry into education and higher rates of domestic duties among women, but in Norway it is almost entirely due to differences in working at home. However, controlling for age and gender differences in work experience, young women in all countries had a higher probability of entering education than young men (cf. Hammer 2003b).

Our major research question related to these trends was whether these differential outcomes across gender and countries relate to the respondents' employment-commitment levels. Previous research suggests that unemployed adults tend to express somewhat higher levels of employment commitment than employed adults. In our analysis, we could examine whether this also holds true for young Europeans with a recent experience of unemployment.

In general, we would expect that those who are economically inactive will have a lower commitment to employment than those who are active. However, the underlying assumption is that the withdrawal from the labour market was a matter of subjective choice, which is rarely the case. Some of the unemployed may be *pushed* out of the labour market because of a lack of employment options. This leads us to expect that, under the most constrained employment opportunities, economically inactive people still may show relatively high levels of employment commitment.

The measure of employment commitment used in our study was originally

Table 2: Employment status at time of interview (in percent)

	Finland			Norway			Sweden			Spain			Germany		
	male	female	all	male	female	all	male	female	all	male	female	all	male	female	all
Un-employed	47.6	34.9	42.1	29.4	27.3	28.5	33.6	28.6	31.1	23.3	30.7	27.9	26.7	22.8	25.0
Employed	21.5	19.8	20.8	35.5	26.2	31.5	32.2	28.7	30.5	52.1	41.4	45.5	26.3	30.6	28.2
Out of labour market	31.0	45.3	37.1	35.1	46.5	40.0	34.3	42.6	38.4	24.6	28.0	26.7	47.0	46.5	46.8
	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

developed by Warr et al (1979).<sup>3</sup> This scale is devised from respondents' agreement/disagreement with six statements:

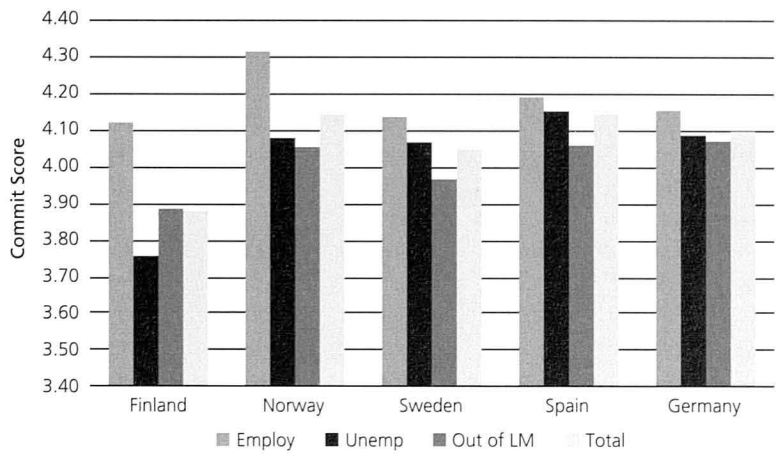
- It is very important to me to have a job.
- If I won a lot of money I would want to work.
- I hate being unemployed.
- I feel restless if I do not have a job.
- Work is one of the most important things in my life.
- I would prefer to work even if unemployment benefits were generous.

The mean employment-commitment scores for those in different employment statuses are presented in Figure 1. Overall, those in employment had higher employment-commitment scores than either the unemployed or the economically inactive young people. The difference between the employment-commitment scores of the employed and unemployed adolescents was statistically significant in Finland and Norway, but not in the other three countries.

This result differs from the findings of previous research (outlined earlier), which found lower employment commitment among the employed compared to the unemployed. However, since all respondents in our sample had previously been unemployed, we were comparing the re-employed to those still remaining unemployed. These results suggest that higher employment commitment may facilitate exits from unemployment, but we lack the longitudinal information to test this.

In Norway, Sweden, Spain and Germany, those young people who remained unemployed were somewhat more committed to employment than the economically inactive (out of labour market). In Finland, however, the inactive had higher scores than the unemployed. Given that the Finnish respondents had by far the lowest levels of re-employment, this result is consistent with the hypothesis that withdrawal under these circumstances is not voluntary and does not reflect a lack of employment commitment. Overall, our comparison between the five countries does not support the prognosis that the national level of unemployment influences the level of

Figure 1: Youth employment-commitment scores by labour-market status



employment commitment, at least among young people with recent unemployment experience. Employment commitment was highest in Norway and Spain, i.e. in those countries that had highly divergent levels of youth unemployment.

Does our empirical evidence support the view that there are substantial *gender differences* in employment commitment, probably with young women showing *lower* levels of commitment than young men?

The results presented in Table 3 show that, despite higher economic inactivity, young women recorded *higher* levels of employment commitment than young men in four of the five European countries, with Norway being the exception. The biggest gender gap in employment commitment was observed in Sweden and Germany. When we look at gender differences within labour-market groups, the pattern remains the same: where there are statistically significant gender differences, the commitment scores are higher for women than for men. Indeed, in three of the countries, the scores for unemployed female youth were higher than those for male youth in jobs. The only case where young men were significantly more committed than young women was among the unemployed youth in Norway.

Therefore, the evidence neither supports the view that, in general, unemployed young women are less committed to employment than men, nor is there evidence that the pattern of gender differences across countries reflects *gendered welfare regimes* that encourage female employment to a greater or lesser extent. In Spain and Germany, where institutions support more traditional gender roles, young women had higher

**In Finland, Sweden, Germany, and to a lesser extent in Norway, young women were less likely to stay unemployed than young men.**



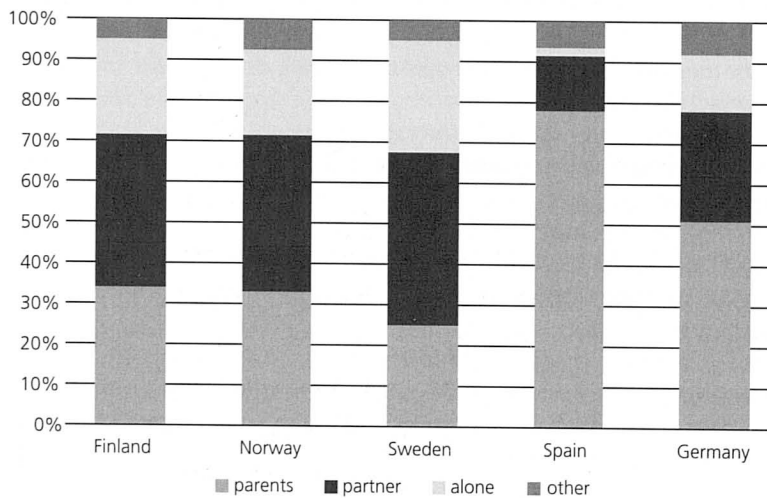
**Table 3: Employment-commitment scores by current employment status and gender**

		Employed	Unemployed	Inactive	All
Finland	male	4.10	3.71	3.85	<b>3.83</b>
	female	4.14	3.83	3.91	<b>3.92</b>
Norway	male	4.28	<b>4.21</b>	4.10	<b>4.20</b>
	female	4.35	<b>3.87</b>	3.99	<b>4.06</b>
Sweden	male	<b>4.05</b>	<b>3.97</b>	<b>3.80</b>	<b>3.94</b>
	female	<b>4.22</b>	<b>4.17</b>	<b>4.09</b>	<b>4.15</b>
Spain	male	<b>4.11</b>	4.14	<b>3.98</b>	<b>4.08</b>
	female	<b>4.24</b>	4.15	<b>4.10</b>	<b>4.17</b>
Germany	male	<b>4.07</b>	4.03	<b>3.94</b>	<b>4.00</b>
	female	<b>4.23</b>	4.16	<b>4.23</b>	<b>4.21</b>
All <sup>1</sup>	male	<b>4.11</b>	<b>3.95</b>	<b>3.92</b>	<b>3.99</b>
	female	<b>4.24</b>	<b>4.07</b>	<b>4.08</b>	<b>4.13</b>

Note: Figures in bold indicate significant gender difference at .05 level.

<sup>1</sup> The total figure does not weigh for differences in sample or population sizes across countries.

**Figure 2: Private living arrangements of youth by countries**



levels of employment commitment than young men in almost all categories.

There is little evidence that high unemployment reinforces traditional gender roles, at least in the form of a general, reduced employment commitment among women. Only in Norway, youth unemployment is relatively low, and there are some indications that young women have lower levels of employment commitment than young men.

#### b) Effects of private living arrangements

The research results outlined above suggest that gender differences in employment commitment and/or work involvement are confined to unemployed women with particular family characteristics. Figure 2 shows that the living arrangements of our respondents differed widely across the five European countries. The proportion of young people living with their parents varied from 71 % in Spain and 51 % in Germany to about 30 % or less in the three Scandinavian countries. On the other hand, the proportion of those living with a partner (either married or cohabiting) ranged from 14 % in Spain to 43 % in Sweden.

Strong cross-national differences also exist in the rates of respondents with children. Only 7 % of the Spanish respondents in our study were mothers or fathers of a child, compared to 28 % of the young respondents in Norway. These percentages reflect dramatic demographic differences across the selected countries, which are documented in the respective national fertility statistics. These national figures suggest that Finland has a higher fertility rate than Sweden and Germany.

**The biggest gender gap in employment commitment was observed in Sweden and Germany.**

**There is little evidence that high unemployment reinforces traditional gender roles, at least in the form of a general, reduced employment commitment among women.**

However, in our Finnish sample, most of the registered unemployed young people were primary job seekers, thus being younger than their peers in the other countries.

The following analyses try to investigate whether the level of employment commitment among young men and women is influenced by their private living arrangements, i. e. living with parents or partner, and having children. We also study whether the impact of the family situation varies across the five countries because of their different welfare models. One of our major questions was whether the impact of private living arrangements is less important for women's employment commitment in welfare regimes that financially support mothers' employment.

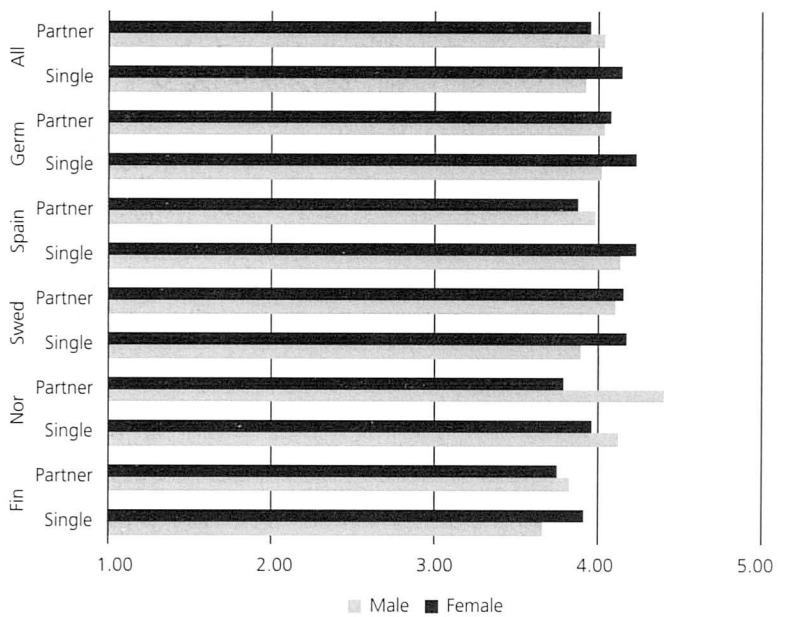
For this analysis, we focus on those young people who were still unemployed at the time of the interview. The data presented in Figure 3 show that – all countries taken together – *single unemployed women* have a higher employment-commitment score than single unemployed men, but married/cohabiting unemployed men have a higher score than married/cohabiting women. This pattern is evident in Finland and Spain, while in Germany and Sweden there is no gender gap in the employment-commitment scores among the respondents living with a partner. In Norway, however, young men have higher scores of employment commitment than young women both within the single and married/cohabiting groups.

It is also worthwhile to compare the employment-commitment scores of those living with their parents with those who do not live at home.<sup>4</sup> If having an alternative source of financial support within the household reduces employment commitment among the unemployed, we might expect both males and females living with their parents to have a lower employment-commitment score than those separated from their parents' household. However, the

**Table 4: Proportion of respondents with children (in percent)**

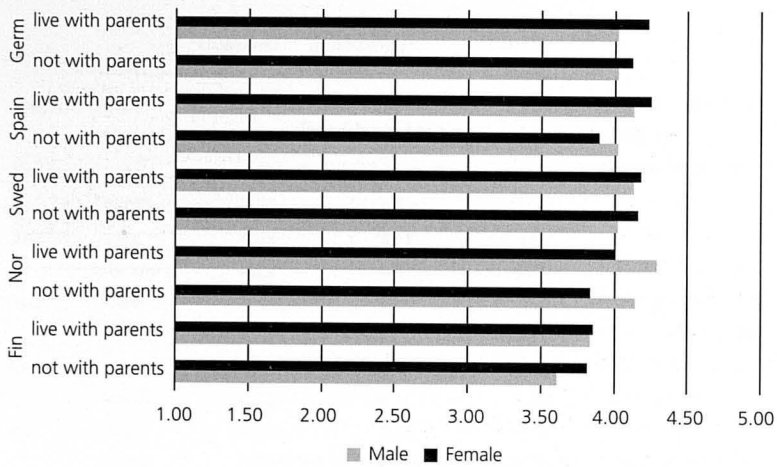
	Finland	Norway	Sweden	Spain	Germany
No children	89.9	71.9	84.9	93.1	84.7
Children	10.1	28.1	15.1	6.9	15.3

**Figure 3: Employment-commitment scores by partnership status and gender**



Note: Only currently unemployed respondents

Figure 4: Employment-commitment scores by living with parents or partners



Note: Only currently unemployed respondents

results show that unemployed young people who live with their parents have higher commitment scores than those in other living arrangements; a difference which is significant in Finland, Norway and Spain. Gender differences among those living with their parents are limited to Spain and Germany, where our results show that young women in this position are more committed than young men (cf. Figure 4).<sup>5</sup>

The fact that living with a partner rather than with the parents has a different impact on young women's level of employment commitment suggests that it is not the financial support *per se* that is decisive. This issue is investigated further below.

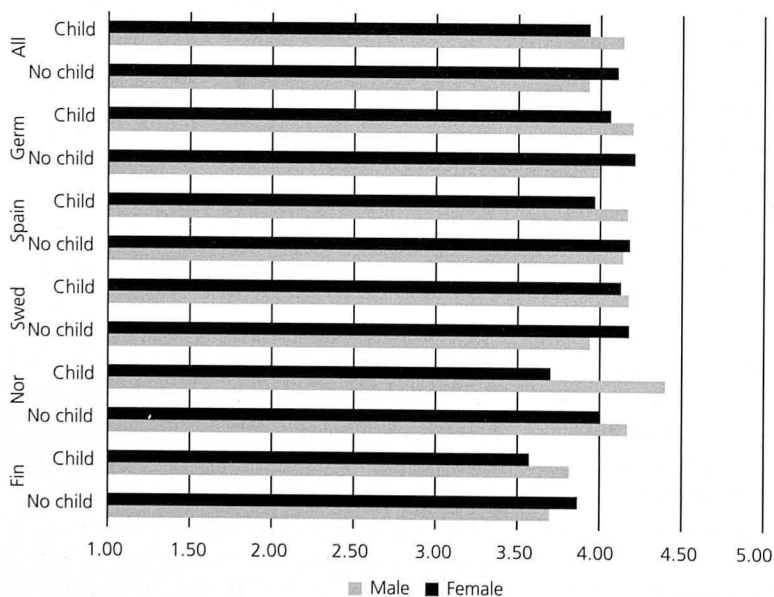
In Figure 5, we compare the employ-

ment-commitment levels of unemployed youth with and without children. Overall, unemployed women without children have higher scores than men without children. However, among those with children, men score higher in their level of employment commitment. This finding holds true for all the countries except Norway, where childless unemployed men have higher scores than childless women.

Do these gender-specific effects of family status remain significant when other relevant characteristics are statistically controlled? This was assessed in detail by way of regression analysis (not shown here), in which the following remarkable trends emerged:

- The *length of time* a young person was unemployed since entering the labour market for the first time has a slightly negative impact on his/her employment-commitment score, even if other factors are taken into account. It is possible that the level of employment commitment decreases with the duration of unemployment (»discouraged worker effect«). Alternatively, there may be a selection effect, with those with low employment commitment being disproportionately selected into the long-term unemployment group. In the absence of longitudinal data, however, it is not possible to separate these two effects.
- The *educational status* is not linked to the level of employment commitment in a systematic way. Those with secondary education had a somewhat lower

Figure 5: Mean employment-commitment scores by parental status and gender



Note: Only currently unemployed respondents

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employment commitment than those with elementary-school degrees, but those with third-level education did not differ from the least educated.

- The *interaction effects* confirm that the impact of the two family variables varies by gender: both variables have a positive effect on young men's employment-commitment scores but a negative one on young women's employment commitment. Moreover, the negative impact of cohabitation/marriage and children on the employment commitment of young unemployed women was not found to vary significantly across the five countries.
- The *impact of family responsibilities* on the employment commitment of young women who have taken up work again varied: having children had no effect on the employment-commitment score, although women who lived with a partner showed a lower employment commitment.

It may be argued that living with a partner reduces the commitment to employment among unemployed women because they receive financial support, which makes the option of remaining out of employment more attractive. Our employment-commitment scale attempts to tap into non-financially motivated employment commitment in items such as *»if I won a lot of money I would want to work«* and *»I would prefer to work even if unemployment benefits were generous«*. Nevertheless, financial deprivation may influence responses to other elements of the employment-commitment scale such as *»It is very important to me to have a job«*.

In one of our hypothetical models, we therefore included a scale of financial deprivation which is based upon eleven questions about the experience of material and social deprivation. It is clear that women with children and/or a partner had lower employment commitment, even when financial deprivation was controlled. As anticipated, increased financial deprivation had a positive impact on employment commitment. However, it did not reduce the impact of living with a partner (for either gender). Thus, the partnership status may not be regarded as a proxy for financial support.

It is also possible that the *family-responsibility* effect is mediated through its influence on coping abilities: when women

have children or/and a partner (with whom they cohabit) they tend to cope better with phases of unemployment, and this may reduce their level of employment commitment. To test this hypothesis, we added a variable on *coping with unemployment*. It is constructed as an index based on six different questions about coping with the latest phase of unemployment:

- *I have more time for family and friends.*
- *I do not accomplish anything.*
- *I have problems planning for the future.*
- *I am financially dependent on others.*
- *I can use my time as I please.*
- *I have more time for my hobbies.*

The response categories for each item are: strongly agree, agree, neither, disagree, and strongly disagree. The negative items were re-coded in order to construct an index. Since job search is also an important coping strategy, we included this information as an additional factor (cf. Kaul/Kvande 1991). Looking for a job was measured by the number of different strategies applied to find adequate employment.

As our analyses show, coping with unemployment has, indeed, an effect on the level of employment commitment both in the unemployed and in the employed group. Those who have fewer problems with managing the situation of unemployment show lower employment commitment. Thus, it can be argued that the causality of factors is adverse, i. e. that those with lower commitment to employment are better in coping with unemployment because they probably find positive dimensions in this situation.

However, the effect of coping was equally strong in the employed group of youth where information refers to previous experience. This suggests that the ways, in which young people cope with unemployment also have independent effects on their employment commitment. More importantly, the gender-interaction effect of having children or a partner on the level of employment commitment remains significant. Therefore, it cannot be attributed to making it easier for people to cope with unemployment.

Taking account of coping abilities, however, has revealed sharper differences by country: there was a three-way significant interaction effect (not shown), indicating that young women with a partner in Norway displayed lower employment-commitment



levels in both the employed and the unemployed groups than their female peers in other countries, and the same interaction effect was almost significant in Spain.

#### Résumé

To sum up, we did *not* find gender differences in the levels of young people's employment commitment between the European countries with different welfare models and gender cultures. In four out of the five countries selected, young unemployed women had higher levels of employment commitment than unemployed young men. Norway was the exception to this: gender differences were greater in Norway than in the other countries, and more young women in Norway stayed at home when they had children. This finding is rather surprising as Norway, along with Sweden, was characterised as a *dual breadwinner* country. However, as mentioned above, the classification of Norway is controversial in the scientific literature. For example, Lewis (1992 op. cit., p. 162) defines Sweden as a weak *male breadwinner* regime, but argues that the Norwegian system has continued to treat women primarily as wives and mothers. Ellingsæter (1998) compares the parents' perceived norms about »equal partnership« in economic provision in the three Nordic countries. She also concludes that, while the idea of the traditional breadwinner model is rather weak in Denmark and Sweden, in Norway the *male breadwinner* norm still persists (at least) at the ideological level.

Both in the employed and unemployed group of females, young women who lived with a partner had lower levels of employ-

**The effect of family responsibilities on young women's employment commitment is particularly clear for young unemployed women and appears to be independent of either financial need or the general ability to cope with unemployment.**

ment commitment. Having children also reduced the employment commitment of young unemployed women, but did not have any significant effect in the re-employed female group. The effect of family responsibilities on young women's employment commitment is particularly clear for young unemployed women and appears to be independent of either financial need or the general ability to cope with unemployment.

These results are consistent with the hypothesis that, where unemployed women have access to an alternative role within the home, this reduces their level of commitment to employment. The fact that this effect is observed among young women in Scandinavian countries, where there is strong institutional/policy support for female breadwinning, suggests that unemployment at this early career stage may reinforce traditional gender roles (cf. Wallace 1987; Hammer 1996).

It is possible, however, that the type of welfare regime affects labour-market decisions that are independent of young people's employment commitment *per se*. To examine this, we carried out a multinomial logit analysis among women (not shown here). In this way, we could analyse the influence of family status on being in employment, unemployment or education as compared with those staying at home (the reference group), and evaluate the impact of having children or a partner in countries with different welfare regimes (controlling for employment commitment).

As would be expected in terms of welfare regime effects, caring for one's children has a *particularly negative impact* on the chances of being either employed or unemployed in Spain and Germany, compared to being involved in domestic duties. Young mothers

who have experienced unemployment in these two countries tend to *withdraw* from the labour market, reflecting the fact that very little public support is provided for employed motherhood.

## Conclusions

Our report has focused on gender and cross-national differences in the levels of employment commitment among unemployed European youth. As to the gender differences, the most notable empirical finding was that in all countries, except Norway, the level of employment commitment was *higher* among young unemployed women than among young unemployed men. We neither found, though, that the employment commitment among young women was affected by the level of female labour-market participation in the respective country or by the different welfare regimes with their respective breadwinner models, nor were commitment levels of young men or women systematically related to the national levels of unemployment. The highest levels of employment commitment were noted among Norwegian youth (although the youth-unemployment rates were below average there) and among Spanish youth, despite the fact that Spain had the highest youth unemployment rates of the five countries covered by our survey. However, the low levels of employment commitment observed in Finland – where the chances of experiencing employment were poorest – suggest that poor employment prospects definitely have a discouraging effect. Our international comparisons of the gender differences in employment commitment did not support the hypothesis that high levels of unemployment tend to prolong traditional gender roles.

However, our investigation of the relationship between gender, family status and employment commitment showed that caring for one's children and/or a partner affects the levels of employment commitment *negatively* among unemployed females in all countries, while the reverse is the case among young men. Unemployed females with partners reported lower employment-commitment levels than others, probably not for financial reasons but perhaps due to role anticipations: if future plans include raising a (growing) family and a woman's

current employment prospects are poor, this may lead to a lower level of employment commitment.

Although the types of welfare regimes of the five countries were not related to the employment-commitment levels of the young, it still is notable that, once employment commitment is taken into account, young women with children in Germany and Spain (countries with traditional male breadwinner models) were more likely to withdraw from the labour market than elsewhere. In other words, welfare regimes do not directly influence gender differences in the employment commitment of young people, but they do have an impact on the actual coping strategies of young women facing barriers in entering the labour market. As Spain and Germany offer little public support for working mothers, unemployed women with children tend to withdraw from the labour market.

Finally, it should be kept in mind that we have tried to analyse the gender differences in the employment-commitment levels of *unemployed* youth. This group has lower levels of general education, usually first experiences from low-skill jobs, and gone through several spells of unemployment. We therefore could expect more traditional gender-role conceptions among the young women of this group, compared to women with better educational qualifications. Our results thus imply *increasing differences* between women in dual breadwinner societies, not only in Norway but also in Sweden and Finland, leading to a broader similarity of this particularly vulnerable group in the European countries.

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**Our international comparisons of the gender differences in employment commitment did not support the hypothesis that high levels of unemployment tend to prolong traditional gender roles.**

## Annotations

- 1 This paper is a shortened and revised version (done by the DISKURS-editor in charge, Sibylle Hübner-Funk) of chapter 4 »Gender differences in employment commitment among unemployed youth« in Duncan Gallie's reader: Resisting marginalisation. Oxford 2004. Oxford University Press kindly gave the permission for this reprint.
- 2 This is a variation of the »work commitment« notion originally defined by P. Warr et al. (1979).
- 3 We use the term *employment commitment* rather than *work commitment* as it is conceptually clearer. Warr et al. (1979) speak of a »work-commitment scale«, although several items refer to a job, which pushes respondents to answer in terms of paid employment.
- 4 Note: Young people living with a partner are a subset of those »not living with parents«.
- 5 The gap is not statistically significant in Norway because the numbers living with their parents are too small.

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