

The changing impact of conjugal status and motherhood on employment across generations of Canadian women

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Abstract

We use event history analysis and retrospective data from the 2001 General Social Survey to study the changing relationships between conjugal life and motherhood and the employment behaviour of Canadian women who were born between 1937 and 1976. Our results show the decreasing importance of marriage to explain the rhythm of entry and return into the labour market among younger generations of women. However, marriage still appears to increase the rate of work interruption for those who had started working. The effect of motherhood on the key stages of women's working lives was also found to vary across generations.

Keywords: *event history analysis, marriage, motherhood, female employment.*

Résumé

Cet article s'appuie sur les données rétrospectives de l'Enquête sociale générale sur la famille de 2001 pour examiner l'évolution des liens qui unissent la vie conjugale et la maternité aux comportements d'insertion, d'interruption et de réinsertion en emploi des générations de Canadiennes nées entre 1937 et 1976. Les résultats issus de la modélisation statistique de type «modèle de risque» révèlent d'abord l'importance décroissante, au fil des générations, de l'effet du mariage sur le rythme d'insertion et de réinsertion en emploi des femmes. Toutefois, le mariage est encore susceptible d'accélérer le rythme d'interruption de l'activité professionnelle auprès des femmes des générations plus récentes. L'effet de la maternité sur les principales étapes du déroulement de la vie professionnelle des femmes est également loin de demeurer stable au fil des générations.

Mots-clés: *analyse des transitions, vie conjugale, maternité, emploi femmes.*

Introduction

Women's work histories are closely interwoven with marriage and motherhood. The course of their professional trajectories is often seriously impeded by these demographic events, as shown by previous studies that have examined Canadian women's family histories in relation to their movements of entry into—and exit from—the labour market. These studies have either supported or reinforced, at least implicitly, the existence of an unequal division of labour between spouses and an incompatibility of women of engaging in both motherhood and work. Hence, they showed that married women enter, or return to, employment less rapidly than do single women (Le Bourdais 1989; Zhang and Beaujot 1998), and that mothers of at least one child tend to experience work interruptions sooner and for longer periods than do women without children (Kempeneers 1992; Li and Currie 1992; Cook and Beaujot 1996).

The results of these studies are interesting in that they provided a broad picture of how Canadian women adapted their professional life according to family events. However, the image they revealed is static and incomplete, since it fails to highlight the changes experienced among recent generations of women. Indeed, these findings are based on older surveys¹ that make it impossible to truly distinguish among the different cohorts of respondents who were born or lived in the second half of the 20th century. In other words, these studies do not allow us to evaluate to what extent the relationships observed between conjugal life, motherhood, and labour market participation over women's lives have evolved across generations. Could the findings observed ultimately conceal very different types of relationships that are masked when not taking generations into account? In view of the distinct cultural, economic, and social settings in which the various generations of women have had to organize their family and professional lives, this is quite likely to be the case.

This article seeks to highlight the evolution of these relationships over generations. More precisely, we want to delineate the changes, as well as the stabilities, found in existing links observed between conjugal life, motherhood, and employment behaviour among women born between the late 1930s and the late 1970s, through an examination of their patterns of labour market entry, exit, and return. Consistent with a life-course approach, our analytical framework takes into account the social and institutional settings in which individual lives are experienced. Over the past years, a series of comparative international studies has revealed profound differences across countries in the structures of women's professional and family lives (Blossfeld and Drobnic 2001; Thévenon 2009). These differences have been interpreted as a range of possible strategies open to women, given the constraints and opportunities of the various institutional and social settings existing in each country. Similarly, one might expect differences arising from experiencing dissimilar settings to be found not only between countries, but also across generations within a given country. Following this approach, we will attempt to interpret the evolution observed in women's employment trajectories as continuous

1. These studies were based on a series of surveys conducted during the 1980s and early 1990s: the 1984 Family History Survey, the 1984 Fertility Survey, the 1988-1990 Labour Market Activity Survey, and the 1992-1993 Survey of Labour and Income Dynamics.

processes of adaptation to the changes occurring in their country of residence. In other words, women will not be viewed as forming a homogeneous group, but rather as belonging to distinct cohorts, whose life experiences were largely influenced by the historic circumstances that they faced.

In line with a previous study (Pacaut et al. 2006), our analysis also attempts to verify to what extent the evolution of women's employment careers is associated with a transformation of conjugal life and motherhood. The changes in women's working trajectories observed across generations have been significant, and have led to a major increase in the rate of female labour force participation over the past decades. This increase is linked to different processes. On the one hand, the phase of initial entry into employment now extends over a longer period, due to the lengthening of schooling among younger generations; on the other hand, the continuity of employment has diminished, with work interruptions occurring at an earlier time following the first entry into the labour market. However, once they experience a work interruption, recent generations of women have been found to return more rapidly and in larger proportions into employment than their elders.

Separate analysis by cohorts of women's employment trajectories is essential if we hope to better predict the behaviours that they are likely to adopt in the future. Women's employment has become the focus of special attention by policymakers, as Canada is expected to experience an accelerated aging of its overall population and a stagnation of its working-age population. Increased participation in the labour market of mothers and of married women, who traditionally had lower employment rates, is now perceived as an important means of reducing the prospective scope and economic impact of these phenomena (Standing Senate Committee on Banking, Trade and Commerce 2006). In addition, such increase would help many families escape from poverty (Fortin 2007).

To conduct such an analysis, we focus on a portion of the retrospective data of the 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) using event history analysis. The following section first outlines the principal theoretical considerations on which our research is based. In the next section, we provide additional information on the data source and methods we used. We then present the main findings of our analysis and, in the last section, we discuss their limitations and implications for future research.

Theoretical framework

Description and interpretation of women's organization of their family and professional lives most often relies on two theoretical frameworks: one that focuses on marriage and the unequal division of paid and unpaid work between spouses, and the other on the incompatibility of motherhood and professional activity.

The framework which focuses on the unequal division of paid and unpaid work is based on an initial observation. The mere fact of living in a couple offers women alternative ways of managing and dividing paid and unpaid work compared to those existing for single women, given that the latter obviously have no such opportunity to divide labour (Beaujot 2000). To account for the lower participation of married women in the workforce, scholars further invoke Becker's (1981) hypothesis, originally formulated in the 1970s, of the complementarity and

specialization of work within marriage. Using the notion of economic exchange, Becker argued that single women and men should be considered as negotiators who attempt to maximize the economic gains they can obtain from marriage. Theoretically, these gains will be maximized if both partners carry out the tasks in which they specialize and for which they have a comparative advantage. Indeed, according to Becker, the skill-development strategies offered to youth and young adults in many Western societies during the 1970s provided a comparative advantage to young women for performing unpaid work at home and, conversely, to young men for working in the labour market (Blossfeld and Drobic 2001). Such an environment would have led to the role of family provider being typically assigned to the husband, and the role of housekeeper to the wife. Consequently, marriage would discourage women from entering into employment and encourage those already employed to leave the labour market.

This hypothesis has been seriously challenged by the sustained rise in female labour force participation and the growing proportion of dual earners among young couples, even among married ones. Oppenheimer (1994) argued that Becker failed to recognize the inherent disadvantages of the spousal complementarity and specialization model in terms of its important lack of flexibility and inability to cope with changes in family composition and those related to the labour market, such as a union dissolution, the death of the employed spouse, the termination of employment, or a drastic drop in income. The deterioration of working conditions starting in the early 1970s also made it increasingly difficult for single-income families to maintain their standard of living and, thus, pushed both spouses towards paid employment (Kempeneers 1992). In this context, the employment of married women has become a suitable strategy for families to pursue, given the increasing risks of economic instability that they now face in society (Beaujot 2000). This argument goes in line with Hall (2002) who, following the work of Beck (1992), Beck-Gernsheim and Beck (1995), and Giddens (1990, 1991), developed the view that the need for individuals to attempt to reduce the level of personal and family risks confronting them is a fundamental trait of contemporary societies. Such considerations undoubtedly apply similarly to women living in common-law relationships. As this type of relationship still remains more fragile than marriage and offers less protection in case of separation, it may encourage cohabiting women to invest into paid work in order to ensure their future.

Other significant changes may be invoked in support of arguments that increasingly question the relevance of Becker's interpretations to account for the professional lives of the younger cohorts of married women. Some studies suggest that women's rising desire for emancipation and autonomy, combined with growing opportunities for employment, in part explain the increasing participation of married women in the labour market (Leibowitz and Klerman 1995; Grimm and Bonneuil 2001). Furthermore, the generalization of schooling and the progressive increase in levels of education achieved by women across generations have contributed to raise the rate of return on their investments in human capital. Technological advances in home appliances and the development of widely available alternatives to many household tasks have also facilitated the entry and continued presence of married women in the labour market, as they give them more flexibility in combining household responsibilities with paid work (Ostry and

Zaidi 1979, cited in Bédard and Gagnon 2000). The rise of part-time work clearly has had a similar effect. For example, the number of part-time jobs has climbed from slightly more than 1.2 million in 1976 to over 3.2 million in 2009 (Ferrao 2010). Finally, the promotion of greater equality between men and women, which has been accompanied by a gradual disappearance of formal barriers to women in the workforce, has been cited to explain the rising presence of married women in employment (Lesthaeghe and Moors 1995, cited in Duval 1997). The fact that parents now tend to give equal importance to the education of both sons and daughters constitutes a clear example of the progression of equality between men and women (Wanner 1999, cited in Beaujot and Liu 2001).

Following these changes, some authors have identified the emergence of new conjugal models, based on companionship and collaboration between partners with respect to paid and unpaid work, to account for the changes observed in the employment behaviours of married women (Marshall 2006; Ravanera and Rajulton 2007; Beaujot et Liu 2008). One could thus expect recent cohorts of married women to have employment patterns that increasingly resemble those of women with no partners.

Further, the notion of incompatibility of roles between motherhood and paid employment has often been invoked to explain the relatively lower participation of mothers in the workplace (Bernhardt 1993; Brewster and Rindfuss 2000; Le Goff et al. 2005). Both economic and sociological theories frame this concept in similar terms, whether they approach it from the perspective of time allocation or of gender roles (Kempeneers 1992). The concept of incompatible roles first presumes that women are unable to simultaneously reconcile their roles of mother and worker. Some scholars maintain that such an incompatibility may stem from normative pressures that force women to favour one role over the other, as well as from women's own perceptions and aspirations, which, unlike those of men, would be oriented more directly towards an investment in family life rather than in a professional career (Hakim 2002). From the perspective of time allocation, which is closely linked to economic theory, time is considered as a scarce commodity, with an intrinsic value that must be managed as rationally as possible (Hantrais and Letablier 1996). Women must thus decide their time allocation—in particular, the time they devote to working and, conversely, to forming and raising a family. Those who decide to invest in the latter often face constraints that do not apply to their peers, since the time they need to care for and raise children reduces their availability for employment—assuming, of course, that they undertake most of these family functions (Laplante and Godin 2003). One can also expect that the time women devote to family increases with the number of children living in the household.

Overall, these arguments first suggest that the different types of constraints associated with the tasks of raising and educating children make it more difficult for mothers than for childless women to be active in the labour market, and more so for those who have a large number of children. From a life-course perspective, this should thus result in mothers having a lower propensity to enter into the labour market—and, once employed, facing a higher likelihood of leaving the labour market when compared to women with no children.

However, in view of the changes observed during the second half of the past century, it seems reasonable to expect that the possibilities for women to combine motherhood and paid employment have improved in many respects. Several of the arguments developed above regarding changes in the participation of married women in the labour market also support the hypothesis of a convergence, over generations, of the behaviours of mothers and of childless women in terms of their patterns of entry, exit, and return to the labour market.

In addition, a series of public policies aimed at children and their families that have been gradually implemented over time has certainly made it easier for women to combine motherhood with a professional career (Tremblay 2004). On the one hand, mandatory and free education for all children from kindergarten through high school has had the effect of considerably reducing the amount of time that children spend at home (Laplante 2006); the increased number of daycare services offered, especially in Quebec, has undoubtedly had a similar effect. On the other hand, the development of job-protected and paid maternity leave programs has enabled women working prior to the birth of their child to maintain a stronger link to the labour market and encouraged the more frequent return of mothers to paid employment (Phipps 2006). For instance, mothers who had worked at least 20 weeks in the year preceding the birth of their child have, since 1971, been qualified to receive maternity benefits for a period of up to 15 weeks. In 1990, nearly two decades later, ten additional weeks were added to parental leave benefits, and 25 more weeks in 2000.² These successive increases have in fact gradually brought up to one year the duration of the total paid leave that mothers can take in Canada.

Data and method

Data

The analysis of women's employment trajectories is based on Statistics Canada's 2001 General Social Survey (GSS) data on "family history." The target population of this survey consists of all individuals aged 15 years and over who were living in the ten Canadian provinces; it excludes individuals living in Yukon, the Northwest Territories, and Nunavut, as well as full-time residents of institutions. The total sample comprises 24,310 respondents (10,664 men and 13,646 women).

The GSS collected retrospective information on the professional and family histories of each respondent. This information allowed us to reconstruct their job and jobless histories (dates of the start and end of each employment and unemployment period),³ the history of all their conjugal unions (distinguishing between

2. Parental leave may be taken by either parent or shared between parents. Mothers, however, constitute the vast majority of parents who take such leave (Marshall 2003).

3. The information collected pertains to jobs (up to five) held on a full-time or part-time basis by respondents after finishing school. To be recorded, the first employment held after leaving school must have lasted for a minimum uninterrupted period of six months; no minimum duration is required for subsequent jobs. Work interruptions due to whatever reason (health, family, economic context, return to school, etc.) were collected only if they had lasted for a period of at least three months. The main reason given for work interruption varies across generations but is mostly family related (e.g., maternity, care to the children, care to older parents, marriage and a residual category 'other family responsibilities'); altogether, this

common-law relationships and marriages),⁴ and their complete parental history (including biological, adopted, and step-children).⁵ By combining all of this information, we are able to examine to what extent the different conjugal and parental situations experienced by women over the course of their lives affect their patterns of entry into and exit from the labour market.

The final sample retained for analysis includes slightly more than 8,300 women, aged 25 to 64 years at the time of the survey, and for whom we were able to reconstruct professional and family histories. To keep the largest possible sample, we imputed⁶ age values for cases with missing data on age at the start or end of each employment or family period. However, we had to exclude a small number of cases for which we could not ascertain whether the respondent had occupied a job for at least six months after finishing school. We also excluded from the analysis respondents who were 65 or older at the time of the survey, in order to minimize the risk of bias associated with possibly poor recollection of events that took place long before the survey was conducted. Finally, we did not include in the analysis women aged 15 to 24, whose family and employment histories were not yet very advanced.

Method

We use event history analysis (Box-Steffensmeier and Bradford 2004; Cleves et al. 2008) to simultaneously assess the impact of several factors on the hazard of women to experience a given transition, such as entry into employment. In other words, we are seeking to predict the probability (or instantaneous risk) of transition or passage from one state into another, conditional upon the fact that women have not yet experienced the transition under study and are still under observation. Women who have incomplete histories (e.g., women who had not yet entered into the labour market at the time of the survey) are censored at survey. We distinguish between three possible successive transitions in women's professional histories: 1) entry into first employment; 2) exit from (or interruption of) the first job for at least 3 months; and 3) return to employment after the first work interruption.⁷

We use the piecewise exponential model to assess the impact of different independent variables on the hazard of experiencing one of the three transitions considered. The piecewise exponential model is a straightforward extension of the exponential model. In the exponential model, the baseline hazard (that is, the effect of time net of the effects of the independent variables included in the equation) is constant over the entire range of what is commonly referred to as

family-related category accounts for three-quarters of the reasons provided by women.

4. The information collected on all of the respondent's unions includes the age (with a decimal) at the start and end (if applicable) of each relationship.
5. The survey recorded the respondents' age (with a decimal) at the birth (and at arrival in the household of each adopted or step-child) and departure from their household of each child that they had or raised.
6. We used a multiple linear regression imputation model. For more details, see Little and Rubin (2002).
7. The following analysis only takes into account the first work interruption and the first return to employment; these account for 64 per cent of all work interruptions and 67 per cent of all returns into employment among the final sample.

“analytic time” (Blossfeld and Rohwer 2002). In the piecewise exponential model, the “analytic time” range is divided into intervals, which associate with different values of the baseline hazard, in order to model the process under study in a more flexible way.⁸ Within this model, the baseline hazard of experiencing a transition is constant within any given interval, but may differ from that of other intervals. The hazard function of the piecewise exponential model is commonly expressed as follows:

$$h_{ik}(t) = \exp(\alpha_k + x_i\beta)$$

where i refers to the individuals and k to the time intervals. In this equation, the hazard of individual i experiencing the transition is a function of: the baseline hazard function α_k , whose value varies across time intervals; the value, for this individual, of each covariate contained in the x_i vector; and the parameters attached to each of the covariates represented by the β vector. In the analysis of first entry into the labour market, analytical time is based on the woman’s age. In the work interruption model, analytical time is the time elapsed since entry into the labour market; in the return to employment model, analytic time is the time elapsed since the exit from the labour market. The independent variables contained in the x_i vector may have values that change over time during a woman’s life.

The coefficients included in the tables and in the graphs are presented in exponential form (hazard ratios).⁹ A hazard ratio greater than 1 indicates that the covariate increases the hazard of experiencing a transition (e.g., entry into employment); conversely, a coefficient smaller than 1 reduces the hazard. For dichotomous variables, hazard ratios need to be interpreted in relation to the reference group (omitted from the equation), which is assigned the value 1. The effect of variables for which the values, for a given woman, may change over time is interpreted in the same way as the effect of fixed independent variables.

Independent variables

Three independent variables, defining the birth cohort, conjugal status, and parental status of respondents, are created to test the hypotheses related to the evolution of the dynamics of women’s employment with respect to conjugal life and motherhood (Table 1). The sample is divided into four *birth cohorts*: (1) Generation X, born between 1967 and 1976 and aged 25–34 years at the time of the survey; (2) the second wave of baby-boomers, born in 1957–1966 and aged 35–44; (3) the first wave of baby-boomers, born in 1947–1956 and aged 45–54; (4) the post-Depression and War generation, born in 1937–1946 and aged 55–64. Each

8. For each transition studied, the choice of the time segments was based on a close examination of the graphic representation of the risk function to ensure the most accurate possible modelling of the baseline risk.

9. Each regression used in this study was resampled using “bootstrap” weights. Bootstrapping is a resampling method that serves to test the reliability of the results. This method consists of randomly drawing sub-samples (with replacement) within the original sample, in order to adjust the standard errors of estimates. Statistics Canada provided a set of 200 bootstrap weights for the GSS, which were used to recalculate the variance of each estimate and determine its level of statistical significance. The use of these weights allows us to determine if the differences observed in the regression are statistically significant with regards to the population studied.

Table 1. Time at risk distribution (in %) and mean valuesa for selected variables included in the analyses.

Dichotomous variables (Time at risk distribution, %) ^b	Entry in first employment	First work Interruption	Return to employment
Birth cohort			
1967–1976	24.6	13.1	7.4
1957–1966	29.8	27.8	21.0
1947–1956	26.1	32.9	34.2
1937–1946	19.5	26.2	37.4
Conjugal status			
Single, without a partner	80.3	38.9	12.6
Married	16.7	51.0	81.8
Common-law union	3.0	10.1	5.6
Parental status			
No children	82.7	59.5	18.6
One child	6.0	16.5	27.2
Two children or more	11.3	24.0	54.2
At least two months pregnant			
No	98.1	96.3	92.9
Yes	1.9	3.7	7.1
Enrolled in school			
Yes	34.4		
No	65.6		
Living in parental home			
No	27.7		
Yes	72.3		
Highest diploma obtained			
Less than high school	68.8	24.9	31.5
High school	22.5	35.6	36.1
Non-university post-secondary	5.6	24.6	21.7
University	3.0	14.9	10.7
Economic context			
Stable or favourable period	64.0	65.0	64.2
Difficult period	36.0	35.0	35.8
Mother tongue			
English	59.8	59.0	59.5
French	28.7	26.5	27.4
Other	11.0	13.9	13.0
English and French	0.5	0.6	0.2
Place of birth			
Canada	89.8	83.5	85.4
Outside of Canada	10.2	16.5	14.6
Region of residence at survey			
Atlantic provinces	10.2	7.7	8.2
Quebec	27.4	26.0	27.6
Ontario	35.4	38.8	34.1
Western Canada	27.0	27.5	30.1
Continuous variables (mean value)			
Years of work experience			7.3
Age at first entry in employment		21.0	
Sample size	8,355	7,660	5,143
Total time at risk	87,120,653	80,612,550	22,266,050

Source: Statistics Canada 2001, General Social Survey on Family (cycle 15).

^a Means and frequencies are based on weighted data, but the sample size represents the original number of respondents; ^b Time-varying variables are in italics.

of these birth cohorts grew up and entered adulthood in very different socio-historical contexts.

The *conjugal status* variable comprises three categories, the value of which might change over time for each woman: (1) not living with a spouse or partner; (2) married and not separated; and (3) living in a common-law union. Two reasons motivated us to distinguish between married and cohabiting women. The first is based on past studies that suggested the existence of a selection effect, with women with greater expectations in terms of equality and independence more likely to opt for a common-law relationship rather than for marriage (Zhang and Beaujot 1998). Because of this “selection effect,” women in common-law unions would tend to more equally share domestic work with their partners and be more likely to remain employed than their married counterparts (Le Bourdais and Sauriol 1998). The second reason is linked to the diffusion of common-law unions that makes it possible to examine the separate impact of this type of union on women’s employment trajectories. For example, 7.7 per cent of the youth born between 1952 and 1956 were living in a common-law union in 1981, while they were in their late twenties. This proportion had nearly tripled to reach 22.6 per cent in 2006 for those born between 1977 and 1981 (Statistics Canada 2008).

The variable that takes into account women’s *parental history* comprises three categories, the value of which might change over time: (1) no children; (2) one child; and (3) two or more children. At the beginning of the risk period (here fixed at 15 years for entry into the first job), most women had never had a child and thus belong to the first category. They move to the second category at the birth of the first child, and to the third one at the birth of the second child.

Control variables

We also wanted to control for the effect of other characteristics that have been shown to influence the employment histories of women, and for which information is available in the survey.¹⁰ Table 1 contains the full set of variables included in the analyses.

The first variable aims to take the effect of pregnancy (being pregnant for at least two months) into account, as past studies showed that pregnancy clearly tends to reduce the labour market participation of women (for a review, see Desai and Waite 1991; Joesch 1997). A dichotomous variable, the value of which may change over time,¹¹ indicates whether respondents are at least two months pregnant (value equal to 1) compared to those who are not (reference category).

Based on the information collected on respondents’ educational histories and patterns of leaving and returning to the parental home, two other dichotomous time-varying variables indicate whether or not the respondents are still living with their parents and whether or not they are enrolled in school.¹² A third time-vary-

10. Unfortunately, the GSS did not collect retrospective information on income or employment insurance benefits which would allow us to test their impact on women’s employment histories.

11. This variable was estimated retroactively for each live birth, by subtracting 7 months from the date of the child’s birth. Consequently, it refers only to pregnancies that resulted in a live birth.

12. These variables are only included in the analysis of entry into the labour market; they add no statistical value to the analysis of the other two transitions given the

ing variable, indicating the highest diploma or educational degree awarded, is also included in the model, given the positive association found in previous studies between level of academic training and participation in the labour market (for a review, see Parent 2006). This variable comprises four categories: (1) university diploma; (2) non-university post-secondary diploma; (3) secondary (high school) diploma; and (4) incomplete secondary (less than a high school diploma).

We also control for another aspect of human capital, by including in the analysis of return to employment a variable measuring the number of years spent in employment.

We have tried to determine the impact of economic context on the dynamics of women's participation in the labour market by including a dichotomous time-varying variable that indicates whether the period of exposure to any given risk of transition broadly corresponds to difficult times in terms of employment, or economic crises (e.g., the first and second oil crises and the recessions in the early 1980s and 1990s).¹³

We also wanted to control for the age of women as they go through life. The age at entry into the labour market is included as a continuous variable in the work interruption model.

Like many other countries, Canada is a rather heterogeneous society, with various geographic, linguistic, and cultural divides. It has received large numbers of immigrants. To take this diversity into account, we created three fixed-value variables that measure respondents' mother tongue, place of birth, and region of residence at the time of survey.

Conditional relations

In order to test for the possible changing effect across generations that marriage and motherhood exert on women's employment trajectories, we estimate their effect conditional on the generation to which each woman belongs. The conditional relations are operationalized by adding product-terms to the equations (Jaccard and Turrisi 2003). We use a two-step strategy to analyze women's employment transitions. First, we estimate the effects of conjugal status and motherhood, assuming that they do not vary across generations; this enables us to test the results of previous studies which used older GSS data. Second, we estimate the equations allowing the effects of conjugal status and motherhood on women's work transitions to vary across generations.

Analysis of Canadian Women's Work Transitions

This section examines the impact of all covariates on the risk of women experiencing a work transition. We first present the results of the models for each

small number of women who are still living in the parental home or enrolled in school past their first entry into the labour market.

13. Specifically, this time-varying variable is created by using beginning and end dates of key economic crises that we define as follows: between 1974 and 1979 (first and second oil crises); between 1981 and 1984 (recession of the early 1980s); and between 1990 and 1993 (recession of the early 1990s). If the woman is exposed to the risk of experiencing any given transition during these years, the variable takes the value of 1; otherwise, it is set to 0.

Table 2. Impact of given characteristics on the risk of women to enter into first employment (piecewise exponential model).^a

Variable ^b	Hazard Ratios		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Birth cohort (1967–1976)			
1957–1966	1.17 ***	1.20 ***	1.16 ***
1947–1956	1.26 ***	1.32 ***	1.28 ***
1937–1946	1.10	1.27 ***	1.20 ***
Conjugal status (Single, without a partner)			
Married	0.63 ***	0.86	0.65 ***
Common-law union	0.93	1.12	0.92
Parental status (No children)			
One child	0.55 ***	0.55 ***	0.65 ***
Two or more children	0.54 ***	0.56 ***	0.63 ***
At least two months pregnant (No)			
Yes	0.48 ***	0.48 ***	0.47 ***
Lives with parents (No)			
Yes	0.92 *	0.92 *	0.92 *
Enrolled in school (Yes)			
No	2.80 ***	2.78 ***	2.77 ***
Highest diploma obtained (High school)			
Less than high school	0.69 ***	0.69 ***	0.69 ***
Non university post-secondary	2.07 ***	2.05 ***	2.07 ***
University	2.78 ***	2.78 ***	2.79 ***
Economic context (stable or favourable period)			
Difficult period	0.94 *	0.96	0.96
Mother tongue (English)			
French	0.93	0.93	0.93
Other	0.91	0.92	0.91
English and French	0.90	0.90	0.91
Region of residence at survey (Quebec)			
Atlantic provinces	0.89	0.89	0.89
Ontario	1.12	1.12	1.12
Western Canada	1.30 ***	1.30 ***	1.30 ***
Place of birth (Canada)			
Other country	0.89	0.88 *	0.89
Time pieces (age)^c			
Time piece 1 - 15–19 years	0.01 ***	0.01 ***	0.01 ***
Time piece 2 - 20–24 years	0.09 ***	0.08 ***	0.09 ***
Time piece 3 - 25–29 years	0.09 ***	0.09 ***	0.09 ***
Time piece 4 - 30–34 years	0.05 ***	0.05 ***	0.05 ***
Time piece 5 - 35–39 years	0.04 ***	0.04 ***	0.04 ***
Time piece 6 - 40 years and over	0.02 ***	0.02 ***	0.02 ***
Birth cohort X conjugal status			
1957–1966 Married		0.84	
1957–1966 Common-law union		0.75 *	
1947–1956 Married		0.74 *	
1947–1956 Common-law union		0.65 *	
1937–1946 Married		0.47 ***	
1937–1946 Common-law union		0.86	
Birth cohort X parental status			
1957–1966 One child			0.94
1957–1966 Two or more children			1.05
1947–1956 One child			0.83
1947–1956 Two or more children			0.76
1937–1946 One child			0.49 ***
1937–1946 Two or more children			0.64 **
Model fit			
Log Likelihood (null model: -6,044)	-4,001	-3,958	-3,955

Source: Statistics Canada 2001, General Social Survey on Family (cycle 15).

^a The coefficients represent $\exp(\beta)$ in the regression equation model. The levels of significance are: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ^b The reference category is given in parentheses. Time-varying variables are in italics; ^c The coefficients associated with this variable, representing the ‘time pieces’, do not constitute hazard ratios, but the hazard itself.

of the three transitions in which the effects of conjugal status and motherhood are assumed to be stable across generations, and then for those of the models in which these effects are allowed to vary across generations.

Entry into first employment

The first model in Table 2 presents estimates of the hazard model of women's entry into first employment; as explained earlier, these estimates are reported as hazard ratios. The results show that women from the youngest generations are less likely than their elders to rapidly enter into the labour market. Hence, compared to the 1967–1976 birth cohorts, women born between 1947 and 1956 and those born between 1957 and 1966 have a 26 per cent and 17 per cent higher hazard, respectively, of entering into employment. These results confirm those of previous studies, which showed that women from younger generations tend to stay longer in school and, thus, to postpone their entry into the labour market (Ravanera et al. 1998).

Our analysis shows that the fact of having at least one child and of being married delays women's entry into employment, as found in earlier studies. Married women have 37 per cent lower chances than “single” women of entering the job market, while women who have at least one child are 45 per cent less likely to do so than childless women, no matter the number of children they have.

At first glance, these results confirm Becker's argument and suggest that married women perhaps navigate differently during their initial presence on the labour market. Marriage, with its complementarity and specialization of tasks, would presumably encourage women to assume the responsibility for unpaid work, thereby postponing their entry into employment. Furthermore, the delay experienced by mothers in entering the labour market also supports the notion of incompatibility of roles between motherhood and employment, at least among this particular group of women who had not worked prior to having a child.

Several other characteristics significantly influence women's rate of entry into the labour market. As observed in past studies, women who are at least two months pregnant have approximately half the chances of becoming employed as do non-pregnant women. Those who are still living with their parents face a slightly lower risk of entry into employment than their counterparts who have left the parental home (coefficient of 0.92).

Not surprisingly, women who are no longer enrolled in school are much more likely (nearly three times more) than those still engaged in their studies to start at least a 6-month-long working spell. Level of educational attainment also affects the timing at which Canadian women enter the labour market. Controlling for school enrolment, we find that women who have not obtained a high school diploma have a 31 per cent lower hazard of entering the labour market than those with a diploma (reference category); in contrast, women who have earned a post-secondary or university diploma are between two and nearly three times more likely to do so (coefficients of 2.07 and 2.78, respectively).

The rate of entry of women into employment varies according to their region of residence at the time of survey and the economic context that they have experienced. For example, residents of Western Canada are more inclined (coefficient of 1.30) than those of Quebec to rapidly enter the labour market, a difference that

Table 3. Impact of given characteristics on the risk of women to interrupt work for at least three months (piecewise exponential model).^a

Variable ^b	Hazard ratios		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Birth Cohort (1967–1976)			
1957–1966	0.85 ***	0.79 **	0.87 **
1947–1956	0.76 ***	0.74 ***	0.81 ***
1937–1946	0.62 ***	0.78 **	0.71 ***
Conjugal status (Single, without a partner)			
Married	1.32 ***	1.32 ***	1.32 ***
Common-law union	1.21 **	1.28 **	1.20 **
Parental status (No children)			
One child	0.81 ***	0.82 ***	0.95
Two or more children	0.54 ***	0.55 ***	0.92
At least two months pregnant (No) Yes	16.37 ***	16.29 ***	16.31 ***
Highest diploma obtained (High school)			
Less than high school	0.88 **	0.88 *	0.89 *
Non university post-secondary	0.99	0.99	0.99
University	0.93	0.93	0.94
Age on entry into the labour market	1.02 ***	1.02 ***	1.02 ***
Economic context (stable or favourable period)			
Difficult period	0.94 *	0.94	0.95
Mother tongue (English)			
French	0.94	0.94	0.93
Other	0.86 *	0.86 *	0.86 *
English and French	0.84	0.85	0.85
Region of residence at survey (Quebec)			
Atlantic provinces	0.89	0.90	0.89
Ontario	0.83 **	0.84 **	0.83 **
Western Canada	0.97	0.97	0.97
Place of birth (Canada) Other country	0.86 *	0.86 *	0.87 *
Time pieces (duration of employment)^c			
Time piece 1 - Less than 6 months ^d	0.00 ***	0.00 ***	0.00 ***
Time piece 2 - 6 months to 0.9 year	0.10 ***	0.09 ***	0.09 ***
Time piece 3 - 1 to 4.9 years	0.04 ***	0.04 ***	0.04 ***
Time piece 4 - 5 to 9.9 years	0.04 ***	0.04 ***	0.03 ***
Time piece 5 - 10 to 14.9 years	0.03 ***	0.03 ***	0.03 ***
Time piece 6 - 15 years and more	0.02 ***	0.02 ***	0.02 ***
Birth cohort X Conjugal status			
1957–1966 Married		1.14	
1957–1966 Common-law union		0.98	
1947–1956 Married		1.05	
1947–1956 Common-law union		0.95	
1937–1946 Married		0.73 **	
1937–1946 Common-law union		0.96	
Birth cohort X Parental status			
1957–1966 One child			0.88
1957–1966 Two or more children			0.74
1947–1956 One child			0.84
1947–1956 Two or more children			0.49 ***
1937–1946 One child			0.72 *
1937–1946 Two or more children			0.42 ***
Model fit			
Log Likelihood (null model: -11,269)	-7,622	-7,597	-7,589

Source: Statistics Canada 2001, General Social Survey on Family (cycle 15).

^aThe coefficients represent $\exp(\beta)$ in the regression equation model. The levels of significance are: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$; ^b The reference group is given in parentheses. Time-varying variables are in italics. The variables measuring school enrolment and living with parents are excluded; they did not add in explaining the model because of too small number of cases in one category; ^c The coefficients associated with this variable, representing the ‘time pieces’, do not constitute hazard ratios, but the hazard itself; ^d No woman has experienced a work interruption during this time interval, since to be recorded in the survey the first employment spell had to last at least six months. Consequently, the baseline hazard associated with this time interval is equal to 0.

perhaps is in part linked to variations across provinces in the age of finishing high school. Going through difficult economic periods appears to slow down the rate of entry into employment (hazard ratio of 0.94), as opposed to living in a stable or favourable economic period.

Finally, the age of women, which corresponds to the baseline hazard in our model, has a significant impact on their rate of entering the labour market. The risk of transition increases through the twenties and then declines constantly with age. In other words, women are more likely to rapidly enter the labour market when they are between 20 and 30 years old than they are later on.

First work interruption

The results of the hazard model of women's work interruption once they have entered the labour market are reported in Table 3. Model 1, which assumes the effects of conjugal status and motherhood to be stable across generations, shows that women from recent generations exit employment sooner after starting their first job than their elders do—or, in other words, that the likelihood of experiencing an interruption for at least three months is higher among the younger generations. For example, compared to the 1967–1976 birth cohorts, women born between 1957 and 1966 are 15 per cent less likely to stop working, and those born between 1937 and 1946, are 38 per cent less likely to do so. These results are in line with those of prior Canadian studies (Le Bourdais 1989; Kempeneers 1992; Pacaut et al. 2006), which showed that movements into and out of the labour market have increased over the generations.

As expected, marriage appears to be linked to a high rate of exit from the labour market. Married women have a 32 per cent higher risk of making such a transition than those who are “single.” Compared to the latter, women living in a common-law union are also more likely to interrupt their employment (by 21 per cent). Contrary to our expectation, this last result tends to suggest that cohabiting women perhaps do not differ that much from their married counterparts in the way in which they negotiate their absence from employment, at least among women who are already working.

One other result runs counter to our expectations: that related to the hazard of women with children to experience a work interruption. Compared to childless women, mothers of an only child are 19 per cent less likely to leave employment, and those who have two or more children nearly 50 per cent less likely to do so. However, it should be repeated here that the analysis does not include all work interruptions, only those that lasted at least three months. This result can thus perhaps be seen as a sign that the resources needed to provide for children make it difficult for working mothers to stay out of work for a long period. Another plausible explanation could be that women on maternity or parental leave did not consider this period as a “work interruption,” if they had planned to return to the job they occupied before going on leave.¹⁴

All other control variables are found to significantly influence the rate of work interruption. As hypothesized, pregnancy is a key factor in the timing of exit

14. The questions asked was: “Since [you first start working for a period of six months or longer], have you ever been away from work for more than 3 months because of a lack of work, sickness, maternity/paternity leave, retirement, or any other reason?”

Table 4. Impact of given characteristics on the risks of women to return to employment (piecewise constant exponential model).^a

Variable ^b	Hazard ratios		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Birth cohort (1967–1976)			
1957–1966	0.91	0.92	0.92
1947–1956	0.66 ***	0.78 *	0.72 **
1937–1946	0.43 ***	0.53 ***	0.42 ***
Conjugal status (Single, without a partner)			
Married	0.76 ***	0.90	0.99
Common-law union	0.92	0.89	0.95
Parental status (No children)			
One child	1.12 *	1.11 *	0.97
Two or more children	1.05	1.05	0.77 *
At least two months pregnant (No) Yes	0.51 ***	0.51 ***	0.51 ***
Highest diploma obtained (High school)			
Less than high school	0.73 ***	0.72 ***	0.73 ***
Non university post-secondary	1.31 ***	1.30 ***	1.29 ***
University	1.40 ***	1.40 ***	1.39 ***
Years of work experience	1.00	1.00	1.00
Economic context (stable or favourable period)			
Difficult period	0.98	0.98	0.95
Mother tongue (English)			
French	1.09	1.11	1.10
Other	0.91	0.91	0.90
English and French	0.98	0.97	0.97
Region of residence at survey (Quebec)			
Atlantic provinces	0.99	1.00	0.99
Ontario	1.10	1.11	1.10
Western Canada	1.00	1.00	1.00
Place of birth (Canada) Other country	0.96	0.96	0.95
Time pieces (duration of work interruption)^c			
Time piece 1 - Less than 3 months ^d	0.00 ***	0.00 ***	0.00 ***
Time piece 2 - 3 months to 0.9 year	1.25 *	1.17	1.24 *
Time piece 3 - 1 to 1.9 years	0.32 ***	0.31 ***	0.33 ***
Time piece 4 - 2 to 2.9 years	0.21 ***	0.20 ***	0.21 ***
Time piece 5 - 3 to 4.9 years	0.13 ***	0.13 ***	0.13 ***
Time piece 6 - 5 years and over	0.12 ***	0.12 ***	0.12 ***
Birth cohort X Conjugal status			
1957–1966 Married		0.90	
1957–1966 Common-law union		1.19	
1947–1956 Married		0.75 *	
1947–1956 Common-law union		0.88	
1937–1946 Married		0.72 *	
1937–1946 Common-law union		1.39	
Birth cohort X Parental status			
1957–1966 One child			1.19
1957–1966 Two or more children			1.02
1947–1956 One child			1.14
1947–1956 Two or more children			1.58 **
1937–1946 One child			1.30
1937–1946 Two or more children			2.48 ***
Model fit			
Log Likelihood (null model: -9,343)	-6,961	-6,903	-6,896

Source: Statistics Canada 2001, General Social Survey on Family (cycle 15).

^a The coefficients represent $\exp(\beta)$ in the regression equation model. The levels of significance are: *** $p < 0,001$; ** $p < 0,01$; * $p < 0,05$; ^b The reference group is given in parentheses. Time-varying variables are in italics. The variables measuring school enrolment and living with parents are excluded; they did not add in explaining the model because of too small number of cases in one category; ^c The coefficients associated with this variable, representing the ‘time pieces’, do not constitute hazard ratios, but the hazard itself; ^d No woman has returned to employment during this time interval, since to be recorded in the survey work interruptions had to last at least three months. Consequently, the baseline hazard associated with this time interval is equal to 0.

from the labour market, with women who are at least two months pregnant being 16 times more likely to leave employment than those who are not. The highest educational diploma achieved by women is also significantly associated with the rate of exit from the labour market. Hence, respondents who did not complete high school have a lower hazard (coefficient of 0.88) of stopping work for at least three months than those with a high school diploma. This unexpected result is perhaps due to unobserved factors, such as the fact that jobs not requiring a high school diploma usually offer less favourable working conditions, particularly with regard to job protection in case of extended absence. The rate at which women leave the labour market is also associated with their age when they first entered employment. Each additional year of age at the beginning of the first job increases by two per cent their hazard of interrupting work. Furthermore, women appear less likely to leave the labour market during difficult economic periods. Those living in Ontario are also less likely to interrupt their employment when compared to Quebec women, as do those born outside Canada compared to their native counterparts, and those whose mother tongue is neither French nor English. The higher rate of work interruption of Quebec women, who exhibit an above-average level of participation to the labour market, is perhaps linked to a greater use of parental leaves.

Finally, the duration of employment exerts a significant impact on the rate of exiting the labour market. Overall, the baseline hazard is the highest (coefficient of 0.10) when women have 6 to 12 months of work experience, and then constantly declines thereafter.

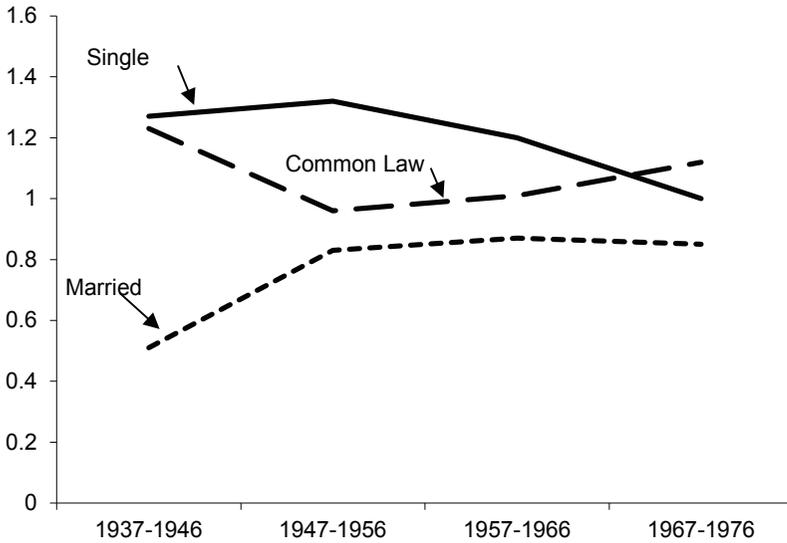
Return to employment

The first model of Table 4 presents the coefficients of the model of return to employment for women who had experienced a first interruption, when assuming that conjugal status and motherhood have the same effect across generations. The analysis shows that the rate of return to work increases across birth cohorts, as was observed earlier by Le Bourdais (1989) and by Pacaut et al. (2006). Hence, the risk of women born between 1937 and 1946 of returning to the labour market is less than half of that observed for the 1967–1976 birth cohorts, and the hazard of women born between 1947 and 1956 is a third smaller.

Examination of the effect of conjugal status reveals that marriage is associated with a slower rate of return to employment when not controlling for its changing effect across generations, and thus first confirms the argument of specialization of work among married couples. Compared to their “single” counterparts, married women have a 24-per-cent lower risk of returning to work. In contrast, women in common-law unions do not differ significantly from the former in terms of re-entering the labour market.

Women’s return to employment is also related to motherhood, but only partly so. Hence, mothers of an only child have a 12 per cent higher risk of return to the labour market than women with no children, but those having two or more children do not show a rate of return that is significantly different. This result seems to conflict with the expectation of incompatibility of roles between motherhood and employment, but it could be associated with the assumption of constant effect of motherhood across generations.

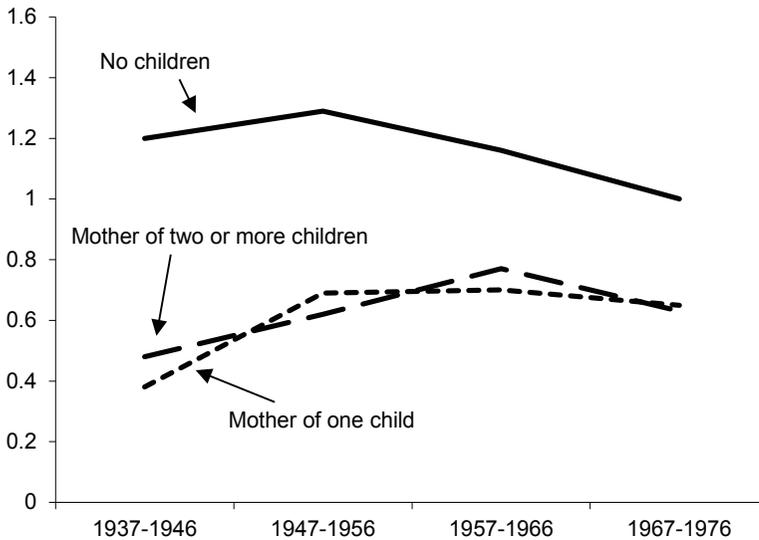
Risk Ratios



Source : Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

Figure 1. Impact, by birth cohort, of conjugal status on the risk of entering into employment.

Risk Ratios



Source : Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

Figure 2. Impact, by birth cohort, of parental status on the risk of entering into employment.

As shown in Table 4, several control variables exert a significant effect on the hazard of women of returning to the labour market. Pregnancy constitutes a major factor for delaying a return to employment; it reduces by half the rate of re-entering the labour market (coefficient of 0.51). Level of achieved education also plays an important role. Women who have not obtained a high school diploma have approximately 25 per cent less chances to rapidly return to employment when compared to those who have completed only high school; women who obtained a post-secondary or university diploma have between 30 and 40 per cent more chances of doing so.

Finally, the duration of the work interruption appears to be negatively linked to the rate of return to employment. The baseline hazard is highest when women have been outside the labour market for a relatively short period of time (between 3 and 12 months), and then continuously declines thereafter. In other words, women are increasingly less likely to return to the labour market, the more time they spend outside of it.

Changing effects of conjugal and parental status across generations

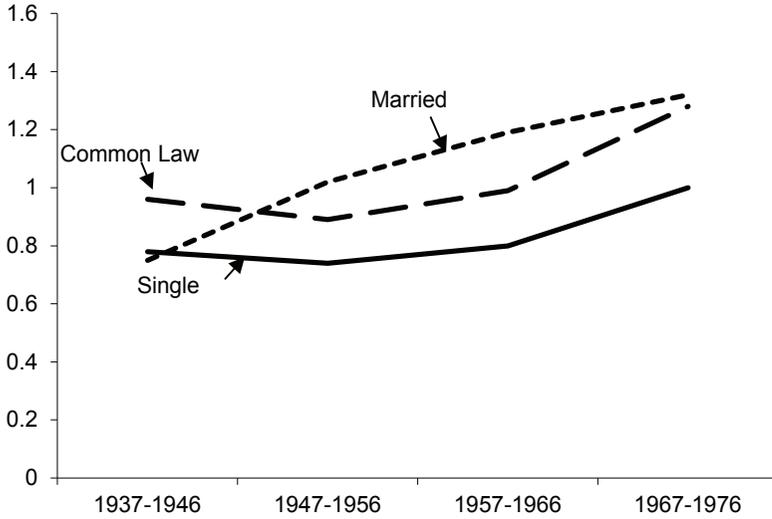
In order to verify whether the effects of marriage and motherhood on the employment trajectories of women have changed across generations, we added conditional relations to the previous models that combine generations, first with conjugal status and second with parental status. The results of these analyses are successively presented in models 2 and 3 in Tables 2–4. The introduction of conditional relations into the equations passably alter the coefficients of the conjugal or parental status variables, and the impact of these variables can no longer be interpreted without simultaneously taking into consideration the effects of the generations, of conjugal or parental status per se, and of the interaction terms. To facilitate interpretation of the results, we graphically present the hazard ratios associated with each conjugal (or parental) status across the four birth cohorts. The reference group to which the other hazard ratios are compared consists of women born between 1967 and 1976 who are without a partner (or without children).¹⁵

Entry into first employment

Figure 1 partly confirms the results of the basic analysis, namely that women from the younger birth cohorts are less likely to rapidly enter the labour market than are their elders—but only for “single” women. Hence, only among this group of women do the youngest birth cohorts show a significantly lower rate of entry into employment than the oldest ones. Therefore, although married women consistently display a lower risk of starting employment than their single counterparts, the gap separating the two groups has markedly declined over the generations. The hazard ratio of married women born between 1937 and 1946 is approximately two and a half times smaller than that of their “single” counterparts, but in the youngest generation it is only 15 per cent smaller. This result suggests that the effect of marriage observed previously mostly applies to the older generations; conversely,

15. The hazard ratio takes the value of “1” for the reference category.

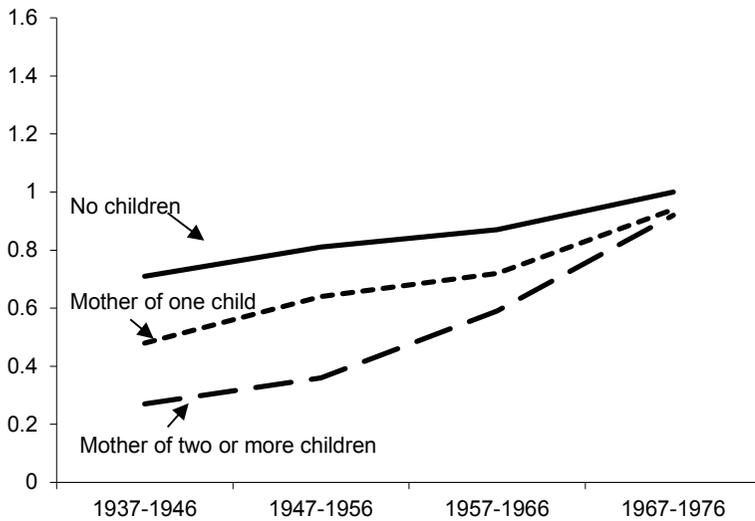
Risk Ratios



Source : Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

Figure 3. Impact, by birth cohort, of conjugal status on the risk of work interruption.

Risk Ratios



Source : Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

Figure 4. Impact, by birth cohort, of parental status on the risk of work interruption.

marriage does not seem to hinder the labour market entry of more recent generations of women.

Women living in common-law unions appear to have experienced a different pattern of entry into employment over time in relation to women with no partner, but statistical tests reveal no significant differences between the two groups, regardless of the generations considered. However, the analysis is based on a very small number of cases in the two older generations, in which common-law unions were fairly rare.

Figure 2, which examines the variable impact of parental status across generations, shows that women who gave birth to one or more children before starting their professional life have significantly lower risks of rapidly entering into the labour market than those who were childless, and this no matter the generation considered. This result in part runs counter to our expectation. Indeed, we expected the increased availability of daycare services and the rise in part-time work to greatly reduce the difficulties linked with combining parental and professional responsibilities among this category of mothers who had never worked. The lack of major change over time is perhaps due to a selection effect, in that women who have children before entering the labour market may possess unobserved specific characteristics, such as more traditional attitudes regarding work and family.

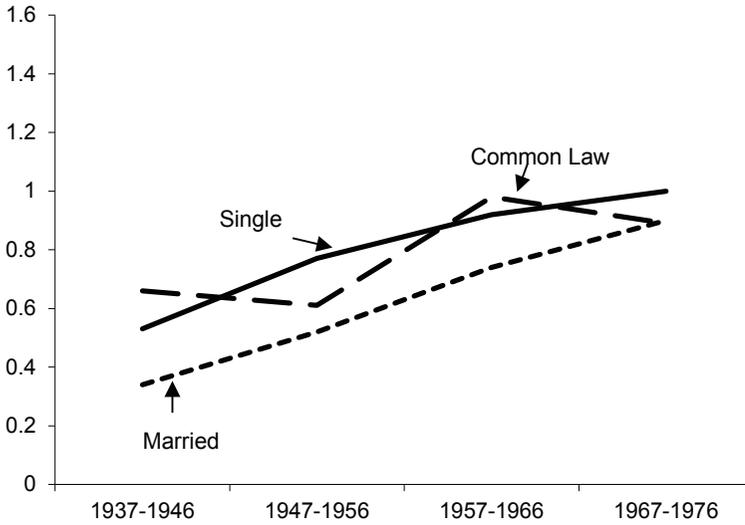
First work interruption

Figure 3, which examines the changing impact, across birth cohorts, of conjugal status on work interruptions, confirms the increased propensity among young generations of women to rapidly leave the labour market once entered, as was observed for all generations taken together (Table 3, Model 1). Results of a previous study showed that earlier and more frequent work interruptions observed across generations are increasingly linked to labour market insecurity, that is, to seasonal work, temporary layoff, end of contract, lack of work, and business or company closure (Pacaut et al. 2006).

Figure 3 also shows that, in all birth cohorts except for that of 1937–1946, married women are more likely to experience work interruption than those who are without a partner. Women involved in common-law relationships are also more likely to leave the labour market than single women, and this relation holds across all birth cohorts (the gaps between the two older groups are not, however, statistically significant). These results tend to suggest that the specialization argument existing within marriage—and, to a point, within common-law unions—would still prevail among young generations of women as far as work interruptions are concerned, in contrast to what was observed for entry into first employment.

Examination of the changing impact of parental status across generations reveals an increase of the risk of work interruption for women who had started working (Figure 4). It also points to a marked decline across generations of the gap separating mothers (of one or more children) from childless women. Among the generation of women born between 1937 and 1946, mothers of an only child had nearly half the risk of leaving the labour market for at least three months, compared to childless women, and those of two or more children had two and a half times less chances to do so. By comparison, the gap separating mothers and childless women has narrowed down to less than 10 per cent in the youngest birth

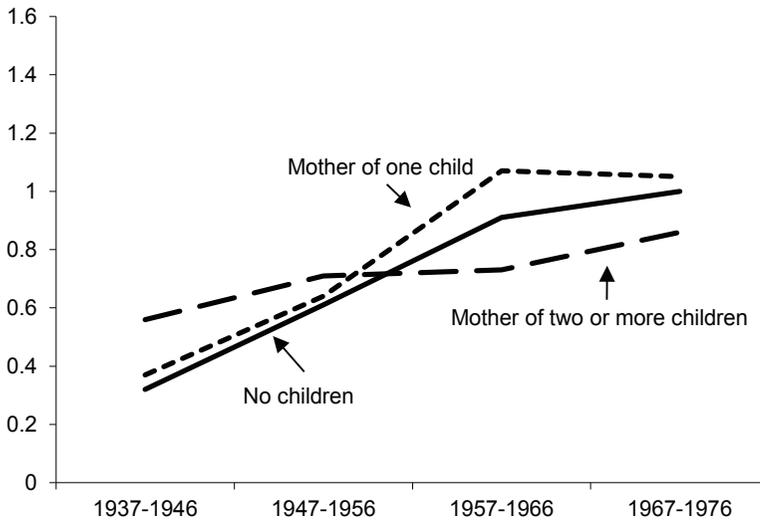
Risk Ratios



Source : Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

Figure 5. Impact, by birth cohort, of conjugal status on the risk of returning to employment.

Risk Ratios



Source : Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 2001.

Figure 6. Impact, by birth cohort, of parental status on the risk of returning to employment.

cohorts. The evolution observed could perhaps suggest that the development of protected and paid maternity leave programs that started in the early 1970s has progressively enabled a larger number of mothers to stop working for periods of at least three months without suffering excessive financial or professional penalties.

Return to employment

Figures 5 and 6 present the changing effects across birth cohorts of conjugal and parental status on the likelihood of women to re-enter the labour market after a first interruption. Figure 5 first shows a regular increase over time in the rates of return to employment among all groups of women. In the older generations, married women were significantly less likely than their single counterparts to return to the labour market, with a risk of return approximately half smaller. The difference separating the two groups gradually declined across the following generations to become statistically non-significant in the 1967–1976 birth cohorts, thus confirming the decreasing importance of marriage as affecting the professional behaviour of women in recent generations. Women involved in cohabiting unions do not, however, differ from their “single” counterparts in terms of their risk of return to employment.

The effects of parental status on return to employment clearly show a different pattern across the generations. Both childless women and mothers of an only child have seen their likelihood of re-entering the labour market increase across the generations, and no significant difference separates the two groups, no matter the generation considered. The situation is quite different for mothers of two or more children. In the 1937–1946 generations, these women had a higher risk of return to employment than those who had one or no children. For women born 20 years later, the relationship reversed, with mothers of two or more children being less inclined to return to the labour market.

Two interpretations can be advanced to account for the results observed for mothers of two or more children. In the older generations, a jobless period without replacement income probably represented a situation too difficult for families with multiple children to endure for an extended period. Among younger generations of mothers, the provision of extended maternal benefits has perhaps enabled an increasing proportion of mothers to afford staying out of the labour market for longer periods of time.

Conclusion

Our goal was to improve knowledge with respect to the changing effect across generations of family life on the dynamics of women’s participation in the labour market. To do so, we used retrospective data from the 2001 General Social Survey on family history to examine the relationships observed between conjugal status and motherhood and the patterns of entry, exit, and return to the labour market of Canadian women who were born or lived in the second half of the 20th century.

What are the main findings of our analyses? On the one hand, analysis of the impact of marriage on the dynamics of women's participation in the labour market, when not allowing for this impact to vary across generations, brought support to the notions of specialization and complementarity of work among spouses. Indeed, marriage was found to reduce the risk of women entering or returning to the labour market, and to increase the risk of work interruption. However, separate analysis of the influence of marriage within each generation empirically demonstrated that such arguments are becoming increasingly less valid. For instance, we observed a clear increase over the generations in the likelihood of married women to enter and quickly return to the labour market, which led to the progressive elimination over time of the gap separating married and single women on this item. However, one cannot claim that the thesis of spousal specialization and complementarity of work has become totally irrelevant among the younger generations of women, since marriage still appears to increase the pace of work interruptions.

On the other hand, our results have shown that the relative impact of motherhood on the key stages of women's working lives is far from stable across generations. Only the rate of entry into first employment appears to be consistently associated with the presence of children, no matter the number of children born. Indeed, we did not observe any notable decrease over generations in the gap separating mothers' and childless women's risk of entry in the labour market. Changing mentalities with regard to mothers' work, as well the increased availability of day-care services and part-time employment, do not seem to have greatly facilitated the balancing of work and motherhood, at least for this particular group of women. However, as argued previously, this result could be due to a selection effect, in that women who have children before initially entering the labour market may have unobserved specific characteristics, such as more traditional attitudes towards family and work.

In contrast, the analysis has shown a gradual decline over the generations of the gaps observed between mothers (whatever the number of children) and childless women in their risk of experiencing a work interruption after first entering the labour market. The effect of parental status on the risk of returning to work, after a first jobless spell, also varies when analysed separately across generations. The most striking result concerns mothers of at least two children, for whom we observed a reversal in their hazard ratios, relative to those of childless women, between the oldest and youngest generations. Namely, the fact of having at least two children rather than being childless, which was linked to a higher risk of return to employment in the older generations, was associated with a lower risk to do so among the younger generations. As mentioned above, it is plausible to argue that these changes are linked to the development in Canada of longer protected and paid maternal leaves, which have enabled a growing number of mothers to remain at home for an increasing time period.

Our analysis is not, however, without limitations, and these are in part linked to the data we used. First, retrospective data, such as those collected in the General Social Survey, are subject to recall bias, especially when they refer to events that occurred in a relatively distant past; this perhaps accounts for some unexpected results that we observed among various groups of generations that have different

recall periods. Second, because the GSS did not collect information on the level and sources of individual income over time (including unemployment benefits), we were unable to verify to what extent the trends observed from the older to the younger generations in the likelihood of mothers to stop working for at least three months—and, for some of them, to return to employment at a slower pace—are associated with an increase in their ability to rely on rising maternity benefits over time. Past studies conducted in Canada have shown that women receiving maternity benefits tend to remain outside the labour market for a longer period after the birth of one child—or, in other words, that they are less likely to rapidly return to employment than those who do not receive such benefits (Marshall 1999; Pacaut et al. 2007; Zhang 2007).

Similarly, the GSS did not collect any information on the work histories of women's conjugal partners. It is thus impossible to take into account the changing strategies that couples might adopt over the course of their union in an attempt to better explain the dynamics of women's labour force participation in relation to their family lives. Some studies have examined the influence of family exchanges and interactions on the employment behaviour of family members. These studies have shown that conjugal spouses and partners do not act in an isolated manner from one another, and that they tend to develop a joint strategy of participation in the labour market (Bernasco 1998; Blossfeld and Drobnic 2001; Martel et al. 2005).

Further studies need to be conducted, and to focus more particularly on the relationships existing between motherhood and employment throughout women's lives, especially as children grow older. The growing importance that part-time work and self-employment occupy in individuals' employment trajectories also needs to be more closely examined from a longitudinal perspective and in relation to the family contexts in which they are found. Finally, the aging of the population increases the need for future research that further analyzes the impact of a new generational challenge—namely, eldercare—on women's work histories.

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