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Measuring the effect of institutional change on gender inequality in the labour market

Martina Dieckhoff^{a,*}, Vanessa Gash^b, Nadia Steiber^{c,d}^a WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Research Unit: Skill Formation and Labour Markets, Reichpietschufer 50, 10785 Berlin, Germany^b City University London, Department of Sociology, Northampton Square, London EC1V 0HB, UK^c University of Vienna, Department of Economic Sociology, Oskar-Morgenstern Platz 1, 1090 Vienna, Austria^d Wittgenstein Centre for Demography and Global Human Capital (IIASA, VID/ÓAW, WU), International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis, Schlossplatz 1, 2361 Laxenburg, Austria

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the differential impact of labour market institutions on women and men. It carries out longitudinal analyses using repeat cross-sectional data from the EU Labour Force Survey 1992–2007 as well as time series data that measure institutional change over the same period. The results contribute to the literature on gendered employment, adding important insights into the impact of labour market institutions over and above family policies that have been the focus of most prior studies on the topic. We find differential effects of institutional change on male and female outcome. Our findings challenge the neo-classical literature on the topic. While our results suggest that men benefit more clearly than women from increases in employment protection, we do not find support for the neo-classical assertion that strong trade unions decrease female employment. Instead, increasing union strength is shown to have beneficial effects for both men's and women's likelihood of being employed on the standard employment contract. Furthermore, in line with other researchers, we find that rising levels of *in kind* state support to families improve women's employment opportunities.

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1. Introduction

A 'Unified Theory' originating from US American labour economists (Blau & Kahn, 2002) claims that the American labour market's low unemployment rates are a function of its deregulated institutions which allow high earnings inequality and considerable employment growth. This research examines the employment–population ratio, i.e.

the share of adults of working age in employment, and compares the employment rates of the US economy to those of Europe. The neo-classical literature on the topic argues that European economies stifle employment growth with their rigid institutional frameworks. Moreover, this work contends that Europe will never be able to solve its unemployment crisis without a concerted effort to deregulate its employment law and its unions, with these institutions characterised as market interventions that stand in the path of market equilibrium and lower unemployment. A specific variant of the argument focuses on the *heterogeneous institutional effects* of macro-economic structures on labour market outcome. It looks beyond the implications of protective and regulating institutions for overall labour

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +49 30 25491150; fax: +49 30 25491 180.

E-mail addresses: Martina.Dieckhoff@wzb.eu (M. Dieckhoff), vanessa.gash.1@city.ac.uk (V. Gash), nadia.steiber@univie.ac.at (N. Steiber).

market performance, and focuses on variation in labour market outcomes for different socio-demographic groups. Regulation, so the argument goes, acts to the advantage of male prime-age workers, who are described as labour market insiders. Labour market outsiders (consisting of women, the low skilled, labour market entrants and older workers, immigrants and the unemployed) are presented as disadvantaged in rigid labour markets (see e.g. Bertola, Blau, & Kahn, 2007; Kahn, 2007). Moreover, deregulation is presented as a way of opening up the labour market, offering outsiders more opportunities for employment and hence reducing demographic inequalities in employment rates (e.g. Bertola et al., 2007; Kahn, 2007). The vast majority of existing empirical work concerned with heterogeneous institutional effects has examined differentials in outcome by skill level (e.g. Daniel & Siebert, 2005; Gebel & Giesecke, 2011; Maurin & Postel-Vinay, 2005; Oesch, 2010). Other inequality dimensions have received much less attention to date. This study's theoretical and empirical focus is on the relationship between gender inequality in labour market outcomes and labour market regulation. It contributes to the debate with an empirical test of the effect of 'protective institutions' on gendered labour market outcome, by examining the heterogeneous effects of changes in national policies and institutional set-ups over time.

Our dependent variable examines the full-range of labour market statuses (covering employment, unemployment and inactivity) and also examines variations in forms of employment by contract type and working-time. Such an approach allows us to holistically identify which labour market categories and which *forms of employment* are likely to increase or decrease as a result of institutional change. This is an important extension of previous work (e.g. Bertola et al., 2007) as it allows us to (1) comprehensively determine where employment gains are coming from, be it from unemployment or inactivity (a category disproportionately populated by women), and to (2) identify the *calibre of employment* change, i.e. do we observe increases in full-time permanent employment, a positive outcome, as opposed to gains in marginal employment, a less positive outcome? As our study looks at gender differences in outcome it also considers the impact of family policies, which are known to affect female labour supply (e.g. Mandel & Semyonov, 2006; Steiber & Haas, 2012). Our paper therefore seeks to contribute to existing work concerned with heterogeneous effects of labour market institutions whilst also engaging with and complementing existing literature on the impact of welfare state policy on gendered employment outcomes.

Our study of 18 European countries uses micro-data from the European Labour Force Survey (EULFS) as well as high-quality time-series data measuring institutional change spanning a 16-year period (1992–2007). Our methodological focus is on *institutional change* within a longitudinal framework. Estimating fixed-effects models and focusing on *within-country* institutional variation allows us to tackle endogeneity problems (see e.g. Gebel & Giesecke, 2011 for a similar strategy) and estimate more robust effects than cross-sectional analyses which are limited to *between-country* variation of institutional effects. The

paper proceeds as follows: we begin with a review of the theoretical accounts on the topic and provide a discussion of the potential mechanisms behind the structuring effects of institutions on gendered outcome. After describing our data and analytical strategy, we present our results. The final section concludes.

2. Background and aims

Analyses of gender inequalities in market outcome have been a keystone of sociological research for a long time. Earlier work tended to focus on women's right to paid work, and was an early rallying cry (e.g. Cockburn, 1991; Orloff, 1993). Yet despite progressive changes in women's labour market engagement (Scott, Dex, & Joshi, 2008), decreases in the gender pay gap (Rubery & Grimshaw, 2014) and a massive expansion of women in higher education (e.g. Blossfeld & Jänichen, 1992), notable gender inequalities in labour market participation persist. It is often argued that men's *unequal* engagement in unpaid care work (Lister, 2003) leads to women's 'outsider' labour market status, evidenced in their lower participation rates, their family related career interruptions and their strong involvement in part-time employment. Women's weaker attachment to paid work is held to discourage employers from hiring them into high-status positions which require high levels of on-the-job training. Employers are said to 'statistically discriminate' against women as they perceive them to have lower work commitment and lower productivity levels than comparable men. This discriminatory behaviour is argued to be consequential for the gender gap in employment and pay. While gender differences in employment outcomes are universal phenomena, the extent of gender inequality varies substantially across countries. This has triggered cross-nationally comparative work focusing on macro-level dynamics and examining the role of national welfare policies and cultures on the gender gap in labour market participation and attainment (e.g. Cooke, 2011; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006; Pettit & Hook, 2012; Stier, Lewin-Epstein, & Braun, 2001). This cross-nationally comparative work has revealed a 'participation-segregation' (Mandel & Semyonov, 2006) or an 'inclusion-inequality' trade-off (Pettit & Hook, 2012) which results from state policy seeking to integrate women into 'female friendly' employment. While such efforts indeed result in significant increases in female labour force participation, they also have the unintended effect of increasing/maintaining gender inequalities in terms of occupational attainment and earnings. Mandel and Semyonov (2006, p. 1911) explain how the provision of 'female friendly' employment conditions offered by the public sector reinforces normative expectations of women as primary carers which serve to maintain all women's economic disadvantage by increasing statistical discrimination and occupational segregation. Recent contributions on the implications of welfare policies on gender inequality have shown that institutional effects are conditioned by socio-economic class. Cooke (2011) examines the intersection of gender and class, revealing how class equality is sometimes achieved at the expense of gender inequality. Countries which have protected working-class workers' rights are also

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