



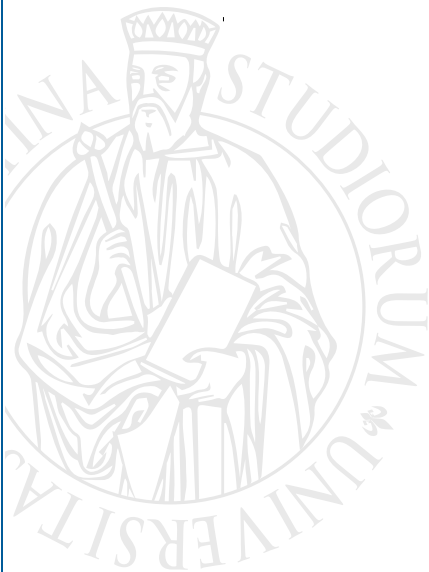
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**Men and women's employment status and
union (in)stability: does
contextual gender equality matter?**

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Men and women's employment status and union (in)stability: does contextual gender equality matter?

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Abstract

Gender theories agree that the role played by women and men's employment status in the prediction of union dissolution depends on the level of gender equality in the society. Given its strong regional differences, Italy represents an excellent laboratory to study how variations in gender contexts influence the gendered relationship between employment status and union dissolution. We measured regional gender equality by means of an index comprising equality in three spheres: the labor market, the family, and the welfare context. By applying discrete-time event history models to nationally representative data, we estimated the probability of union dissolution for jobless and employed men and women across regions. Our results showed that, as contextual gender equality increases, differences by employment status diminish, and gender differences in the relationship between employment status and union dissolution virtually disappear – even in a country considered 'traditional' in terms of family and gender dynamics.

Keywords: union dissolution; divorce; gender equality; employment status; Italy

1. Introduction

Employment status is regarded as an important determinant of union dissolution (Poortman, 2005; Sayer *et al.*, 2011; Vignoli *et al.*, 2018). In many countries, the relationship has been found to be gender-specific: joblessness is a facilitator of men's dissolution, and an inhibitor of women's dissolution; likewise, women's employment is associated with a higher separation risk, while men's employment stabilizes relationships (Conger *et al.*, 1990; Killewald, 2016; Bastianelli and Vignoli, 2022). Nevertheless, in other countries, and in more recent times, few studies highlight that these gendered patterns no longer persist (Jalovaara, 2003; Hansen, 2005; Di Nallo *et al.*, 2021). According to gender theories, this is because the role played by women and men's labor-market positions in the prediction of union dissolution is shaped by the level

and type of gender equality of the context in which they are embedded (Cooke, 2006; Goldscheider, Bernhardt and Lappegård, 2015).

There is a wide-ranging debate on the meaning of gender equality and how to measure it (Sen, 1990; Verloo, 2007; Bericat, 2012). Gender equality can be conceived as the effective equality between men and women: it entails the concept that both men and women are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations imposed by stereotypical views, rigid gender roles, and prejudices. It can be measured by comparing outcomes for men and women in numerous areas, such as education, employment, wages, time, and power (Mencarini, 2014; Oláh, Vignoli and Kotowska, 2021). Considering the outcomes in these various spheres is crucial because they are generated by processes rooted in the gender structure of a society (Risman, 2018). The level and type of gender equality in a society is the result of a complex interplay of micro, meso and macro factors, and then of material, symbolic and institutional ones (Crompton, 2006). As now largely recognized since the development of gender equality indexes (Humbert and Hubert, 2021), because gender inequality is a multifaceted concept, measuring it requires the use of multiple indicators: no single measure can capture all the dimensions in which gender inequality can occur.

Since the gender structure of a society defines both the normative and material space of women's and men's choices – that is, by using a rational choice language, it defines both preferences and opportunities/constraints – it also shapes divorce risks. From a cultural perspective, we can expect that, in contexts with a prevalence of the male-breadwinner model – where women are mainly responsible for care and housekeeping and men for providing income – because women's participation in the labor market and men's poor economic performance are perceived as being in conflict with gender norms, they may exacerbate discord in the couple and lead to a higher risk of separation (Killewald, 2016; Gonalons-Pons and Gangl, 2021). Also from an economic perspective, there is evidence that in gender-unequal societies job opportunities for women are generally scarce and low-paid, with the consequence that women are largely economically dependent on their male partners and face high economic barriers to separation (Sayer and Bianchi, 2000; Sayer *et al.*, 2011). By contrast, men's joblessness tends to generate economic hardship and relational stress, which may undermine the quality of the relationship and increase the risk of separation. As a society becomes more egalitarian outside and within the family – that is, as the 'gender revolution' (Esping Andersen, 2009; Hochschild, 1989; Goldscheider *et al.*, 2015) advances – women's employment and men's poor performance in the labor market should be less harmful for couple stability because

they do not clash with prevalent gender norms (Gonalons-Pons & Gangl, 2021; Killewald, 2016). Moreover, as the dual-earner model becomes the norm, because dual-earner couples have generally a larger joint income, they should be better prepared if one of the partners becomes jobless, so that they have more stable relationships (Oppenheimer, 1994). Therefore, in more gender equal societies, gender differences in the relationship between employment status and union dissolution ought to disappear, and being employed should be associated with more stable relationships for both men and women.

Although these mechanisms have often been used to explain gender and contextual differences in the relationship between employment status and union dissolution, studies that directly address and test the role of contextual gender equality are scant. The aim of this study is to analyze whether, and how, gender differences in the relationship between employment status and union dissolution are moderated by the aggregate (contextual) level of gender equality. We studied the case of Italy, a country where the phenomenon of union dissolution is growing rapidly, where employment status has been found to have an opposite association with couple stability for women and men (de Rose and Di Cesare, 2007; Bastianelli and Vignoli, 2022), and where territorial (regional) differences in terms of gender equality are marked. Hence, Italy represents an excellent case study of how the gender context shapes the relationship between employment status and union dissolution.

We characterized the levels of gender equality in the country's regions by means of an index measuring behavioral outcomes in three institutions: the labor market (the percentage of dual-earner couples), the family (the symmetry in the division of domestic and care work), and the welfare context (the share of children in childcare services). We used retrospective individual-level survey data from the 2016 Istat survey "Families social subject and the life cycle", merged with yearly regional-level data, covering the period from 2004 to 2016. The statistical analysis employed discrete-time event history models to address differences in the likelihood of union dissolution for jobless and employed women and men in regions of Italy with different levels of gender equality.

2. Theoretical background

Joblessness, employment, and union dissolution in male-breadwinner contexts

Joblessness have been repeatedly linked to union dissolution (Conger *et al.*, 1990; Hansen, 2005; Doiron and Mendolia, 2012; Solaz *et al.*, 2020; Di Nallo *et al.*, 2021). Indeed, in contemporary Western societies, being jobless, either because someone is unemployed or inactive, is a major cause of economic and social disadvantage because paid work is a source of economic security, social inclusion, and well-being (Gallie, 1999; Biegert, 2019). Joblessness may carry a severe lifetime income penalty, and it is directly associated with low subjective well-being, psychological distress, frustration, and depression (Whelan, 1994; Oesch and Lipps, 2013). The detrimental effects of joblessness are often not only limited to the unemployed or inactive person but also affect those closest to him/her (Howe, Levy and Caplan, 2004). The financial pressures and loss of income deriving from joblessness may undermine marital quality (Kinnunen and Feldt, 2004; Poortman, 2005), while psychological distress is liable to spill over and foster marital conflict (Conger *et al.*, 1990; Randall and Bodenmann, 2009). Thus, joblessness is likely to increase the risk of union dissolution. Nevertheless, while these mechanisms have been widely confirmed when considering men's joblessness (Conger *et al.*, 1990; Doiron and Mendolia, 2012), the pattern is not as straightforward when jobless women are considered (Solaz *et al.*, 2020).

Indeed, in societal contexts where men are the main providers of the family income, and women, if anything, occupy more alternative and 'compensatory' economic roles, women's joblessness does not impose the same financial strain on families. Likewise, it does not cause the same psychological normative and practical distress because providing income is not considered women's prerogative (Liker and Elder, 1983; Starkey, 1996). Moreover, in male-breadwinner contexts, many jobless women are often partners in couples with a more traditional view of the family which in turn makes them less likely to break-up (Vignoli *et al.*, 2018). On the contrary, what has often been found to be harmful for family stability is women's employment.

During its early growth, women's employment was closely associated with increased union dissolution (Becker, Landes and Michael, 1977; Cherlin, 1979). Gary Becker's well-known specialization hypothesis (Becker, 1973, 1991; Becker *et al.*, 1977) depicts the rise in divorce as a product of the changing gender division of labor. According to this hypothesis, the main gain of marriage derives from the mutual dependence of the spouses, with one partner focusing

on income provision, and the other partner on home production. Due to culturally rooted gender norms and the gender gap in wages, the female partner usually specializes in the housework and the male partner in breadwinning. This gendered specialization in the division of labor within nuclear families is claimed to increase the benefits of marriage, and enhance stability. It follows that, as women increasingly pursue careers, men's and women's 'complementary' skills converge, reducing the gain from marriage, and increasing the probability of divorce.

Subsequent theoretical elaborations identified the rise in economic opportunities for women not as a threat to the marriage contract based on specialization, but as a necessary condition for exiting unsatisfying marriages (Cherlin, 1979; Degler, 1980). The economic independence hypothesis claims that women in the past, who lacked economic independence, were often trapped in unhappy marriages (Sayer and Bianchi, 2000). Hence, the rise of employment opportunities for women, and their consequent financial autonomy, eventually made it possible for them to dissolve such marriages. Moreover, women's employment is not merely a force driving divorce rates up; it also includes the possibility that women dissatisfied with their marriages can find a job, or intensify their efforts in the labor market in anticipation of a divorce (Vignoli *et al.*, 2018).

Joblessness, employment, and union dissolution as the gender revolution progresses

More recent theoretical developments have addressed the role of the societal gender context in which couples are embedded in shaping family dynamics, including divorce. According to the *gender institution perspective* (Sayer *et al.*, 2011; Killewald, 2016), or the *gender social stress mechanisms* (Gonalons-Pons and Gangl, 2021), the risk of divorce within a couple also depends on deviance from or compliance with the prevalent gender model; divorce is more likely when the spouses' employment and earnings are in contrast with the prevalent gender culture. The gender culture comprises a set of beliefs, norms, and social expectations defining masculinity and femininity in a given society. It defines standards and expectations about men's and women's social roles, which stem from commonly held beliefs in the community, within a range that defines a particular society, culture, and community at that point in time (EIGE, 2020). Gender norms are constructed at a societal level, and are thus conceptually distinct from individuals' gender attitudes, which vary among individuals. It follows that, in conservative gender cultures, even couples with more gender-egalitarian attitudes may suffer stress from violating gender norms (Kalmijn, Graaf and Poortman, 2004; Neyer, Lappegård and Vignoli,

2013). Generally, couples tend to ‘do gender’, that is, to reproduce their expected gender social role (West and Zimmerman, 1987, 2009). When individuals and couples do not succeed in ‘doing gender’ according to social expectations, they suffer social confusion and distress, which may increase their risk of union dissolution (Gonalons-Pons and Gangl, 2021).

Similarly, resuming the feminist argument on the stalled and uneven gender revolution (Hochschild, 1989; England, 2010; Gerson, 2010), various scholars have developed perspectives based on the changing equilibrium in gender relations, like the *Multiple Equilibria model* (Esping-Andersen & Billari, 2015), or the *Gender Revolution* (Goldscheider, Bernhardt and Lappegård, 2015). According to these perspectives, whether women’s employment leads to a higher risk of union dissolution depends on the level of gender equality in the society, and on which ‘phase’ of the gender revolution it is situated in. The change in gender roles can be seen as a two-stage process. The first phase is characterized by a drastic increase in women’s employment, with a consequent gain in women’s financial autonomy, with a weak increase in men’s share of housework within the family and with scant social policies promoting gender equality. In this stage, according to the gender revolution perspective, union dissolution is not attributable to women’s employment itself, but rather to the incoherence and unfairness of women having to shoulder the twofold burden of paid and unpaid work. These factors generate or intensify work-family tensions, and upset the equilibrium in the marital dyad (Bellani, Esping Andersen and Pessin, 2018; Mencarini and Vignoli, 2018). The second phase is characterized by a shift at the societal level – with the emergence of new policies promoting work-family balance, and with men assuming domestic and care responsibilities – towards a dual earner-dual carer model. Theories predict that this will lead to a new work-life balance and more gender-equal relationships, resulting in greater union stability, and in an equal effect of his and her employment status on union stability.

In support of these mechanisms, since the beginning of the 2000s studies on Scandinavian countries, where gender egalitarianism has a quasi-normative status, have reported similar effects of his and her unemployment on separation risk. In Finland, couples in which the husband, or wife, or both, are unemployed, are more likely to separate (Jalovaara, 2003, 2013). Likewise, in Norway, unemployment is associated with a higher risk of separation for both men and women; but the magnitude of the effect is much smaller than those found for other countries, supporting the hypothesis that joblessness is less disruptive for relationships in more gender symmetric societies (Hansen 2005). A recent study by Di Nallo et al. (2021), on the effect of unemployment on couples separating in Germany and the UK, reported a similar

negative effect of women's and men's unemployment on couple stability in the two countries, suggesting that as women's role in the labor market is changing, so are the consequences of women's unemployment on union dissolution risks. Similarly, focusing on earnings, a study by Schwartz and Gonalons-Pons (2016) found that wives' relative earnings were positively associated with the risk of divorce among couples married in the late 1960s and 1970s, but this was no longer the case for couples married in the 1990s (Schwartz and Gonalons-Pons, 2016). Moreover, Gonalons-Pons and Gangl (2021) directly addressed the role of the gender context comparing 29 western countries over the period 2004-2014. Importantly, they found that men's unemployment is associated with a higher risk of couple separation in countries where a substantial share of the population believes that breadwinning is men's primary role. In a similar vein, a study on the Italian context suggests that women's employment does not have a negative effect per se on union stability, and that the woman's paid work becomes detrimental to the stability of the union only if the man's contribution to unpaid work is limited (Mencarini and Vignoli, 2018).

3. Gender equality in Italian regions

Italian society still displays considerable gender inequalities in both values and behaviors. Nevertheless, there are evident regional differences, and important signs of change are emerging. In the Gender Equality Index of the European Institute of Gender Equality, Italy scored 53.3 in 2010, and 63.5 in 2020. Despite the improvement in the past ten years, the current score is still below the EU average (67.9 in 2020), and very far from those of northern European countries such as Denmark and Sweden (respectively 77.4 and 83.8) (EIGE, 2020).

The Italian labor market presents striking gender differences in labor-market participation. Although women's employment rate has considerably increased in recent decades, the difference between women's and men's employment rates has remained sizeable. The country's average employment rate of women aged 15-64 is currently 52.1%, while the corresponding figure for men is 69.4% (Istat, 2023). Nevertheless, geographic differences in women's labor-force participation are marked, with rates in the North being almost double those in the South. Indeed, women's employment rate is about 62% in northern regions, 58% in central regions, and 35% in southern regions (Istat, 2023). From a couple's perspective, although at the country level the dual-earner model is now the most common, it still represents less than half of all couples. However, again, there are notable regional differences. In northern

regions, couples in which only the man works amount to 25%, and the most widespread model is the dual-earner one (55% of couples). By contrast, in southern regions the male-breadwinner model is still the most widespread, representing 40% of all couples, while dual-earners still represent only the 26% (Istat, 2023).

Value surveys have shown that, in Italy, the dominant societal definition of what good care is, and who should provide it, has remained partly anchored to the woman's role (Blome, 2016; Lomazzi, 2017). Italian women are still much more likely to be inactive due to domestic and care responsibilities than are women in other European countries, and the burden of unpaid domestic work is unevenly carried by women, even among dual-earner couples (Dotti Sani, 2018; Eurostat, 2021). Nevertheless, important changes towards greater levels of gender equality have occurred over time, especially in northern regions and among the most educated couples (Andreotti, Mingione and Pratschke, 2013; Naldini and Solera, 2018).

Finally, despite the increase in women's labor force participation, policies aimed at promoting work-family balance and gender equality are still limited, and have been characterized by a certain degree of inertia in recent decades (Naldini and Saraceno, 2008). The availability of child-care provided by the state for under 3-year-old children is still scant, favoring instead care given by grandparents and family members (Naldini and Saraceno, 2011). In Italy also policies in support of fathers' involvement and dual earner-dual carer societies (Gornick et al 2004) continue to be weak, with paternity leave introduced only in 2012 and only for a few days (Cannito, 2022). However, the provision of many reconciliation services, such as childcare, are of regional competence, and again, there is a clear divide between the north-center and south-islands regions (Naldini & Saraceno, 2008; Istat, 2023).

Against this backdrop, given the wide regional differences in aggregate gender equality within and outside the family, we expect that in more egalitarian regions gender differences in the effect of employment status on union dissolution diminish or disappear and the role of employment status for union dissolution is less pronounced

4. Data and methodology

For our analysis we used individual-level data from the 2016 "Family, Social Subjects, and the Life Cycle" survey conducted by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istat). This is the largest and most reliable retrospective and nationally representative survey on Italian

individuals and their families. The surveys carried out in 2016 collected information on approximately 30,000 individuals aged 18 years and older, with an overall response rate of 80 per cent. We merged these data with NUTS-2 level yearly indicators of gender equality, covering the period from 2004 to 2016 (described in detail in the next section). The survey gathered detailed retrospective information on family, employment, and employment-related residential histories which enabled us to estimate discrete time event history models, with monthly precision (Allison, 1982). We followed individuals from their first union formation to union dissolution. Episodes were right-censored if the partner died, and if the union had not ended. The analysis considered differences by employment status in the likelihood of union dissolution, and their interaction with contextual gender equality, separately for men and women.

The event studied was union dissolution, including all first unions, be they cohabitations or marriages. For non-marital cohabitations, union dissolution corresponds to the reported date of relationship termination and, for marriages, to the date of *de facto* separation, i.e., separations not yet accompanied by legal provision. The moment of *de facto* separation is in fact the moment that marks the marriage's dissolution, and it is consistent with the relationship terminations used for non-marital unions. Marriage and cohabitation in Italy differ in terms of socioeconomic composition and dissolution rates (Guetto *et al.*, 2016; Bastianelli, Guetto and Vignoli, 2023). Thus, for a robustness check, we estimated our models separately for marriages and cohabitations. The results for the two groups were consistent. Consequently, we decided to keep them together and control for the type of union (results available upon request).

Because we focused on employment status, the analysis was limited to the working-age population (aged from 15 to 60), and we excluded students and retired individuals. Moreover, in order to differentiate between casual or fleeting relationships and committed unions, those respondents who had dissolved their union before their 20s, or those whose union had lasted less than three months, were excluded. The final sample consisted of $N = 6,017$ women, of whom $N = 608$ had their first union dissolved, and $N = 5,361$ men, with $N = 580$ dissolutions.

The main independent variable in our analysis is the respondent's employment status, which is a time-varying indicator measuring whether the respondent was employed or jobless. Previous research has shown that the type of contract has also an impact on union dissolution, and men with time-limited contracts are more likely to experience union dissolution than are those who are permanently employed (Bastianelli and Vignoli, 2022; Laß, 2022). Therefore, for a robustness check, we ran our analysis excluding from the employed group those with time-

limited jobs or self-employed. The results were stable; therefore, to maintain a higher numerosity in our sample, we kept all types of contracts together (results from this supplementary analysis are available upon request). Our data did not make it possible to distinguish unemployment from inactivity, and ‘jobless’ is a broad category including those who are actively looking for a job as well as those who are inactive in the labor market, like, for instance, discouraged unemployed persons or housewives¹. Although this was indeed a limitation, we consider it carefully in the interpretation of our results.

The regional variable indicates the region of residence of the respondent, and it is time-varying because individuals may move among regions over their life course. The survey includes two regional variables: one is constant, reporting the region of residence at the time of the interview, and the other is time-varying, indicating the region where the respondent resided during each employment spell. However, the time-varying region of residence is missing for jobless spells. Thus, for spells of joblessness, we imputed as region of residence the region of the preceding employment spell, if any, or the region of residence at the time of interview if the respondent had never worked for the entire duration of the union. Over the first union, only a few couples move to different regions. Indeed, residential relocation usually occurs at the beginning of the union, or after divorce (Mikolai and Kulu, 2018; Mikolai, Kulu and Mulder, 2020). Therefore, our imputation is rather solid. Nevertheless, for a robustness check, we estimated the models with and without imputation, and we used NUTS-1 regions (i.e. five macro-regions) instead of NUTS-2 regions (i.e. twenty regions) to include the possibility that the respondent had moved within the macro-region. The results were stable also to these additional tests.

The model equation includes the primary correlates of union dissolutions as identified by the literature: cohort; union duration (specified as 0-2 years since union formation as baseline, and then 3-7 years, 8-15 years, and 15+ years); type of union (marriage vs. cohabitation); number of children; parental education and separation (Vignoli and Ferro, 2009; Lyngstad and Jalovaara, 2010). Type of union, and number of children are time-varying variables. Moreover, in order to account for contextual factors other than gender equality that might also influence the relationship between employment status and union dissolution, we included a control for calendar year and region fixed effects.

¹ In the attempt to distinguish inactive from unemployed women we estimated additional models interacting the employment status with the level of education (as women with low education should be more likely inactive when they are jobless, while women with higher education should be more likely to be unemployed as they have a higher earnings potential and labour market attachment). Nevertheless, we did not find any difference in the effect of employment status on union dissolution across educational level.

The gender equality index

To characterize the gender context, in line with the ‘gender revolution’ debate, we constructed an index comprising three dimensions: the share of dual-earner couples; symmetry in the division of care and domestic work within dual-earner couples; and the use of childcare services for children less than 3 years old. Women’s participation in paid work is the first step towards a more egalitarian society because it gives women economic independence from the family. Nevertheless, gender equality is only achieved when housework and care responsibilities are shared within couples, as well as when welfare policies support the dual-earner dual-carer model (Lappegård, Neyer and Vignoli, 2021).

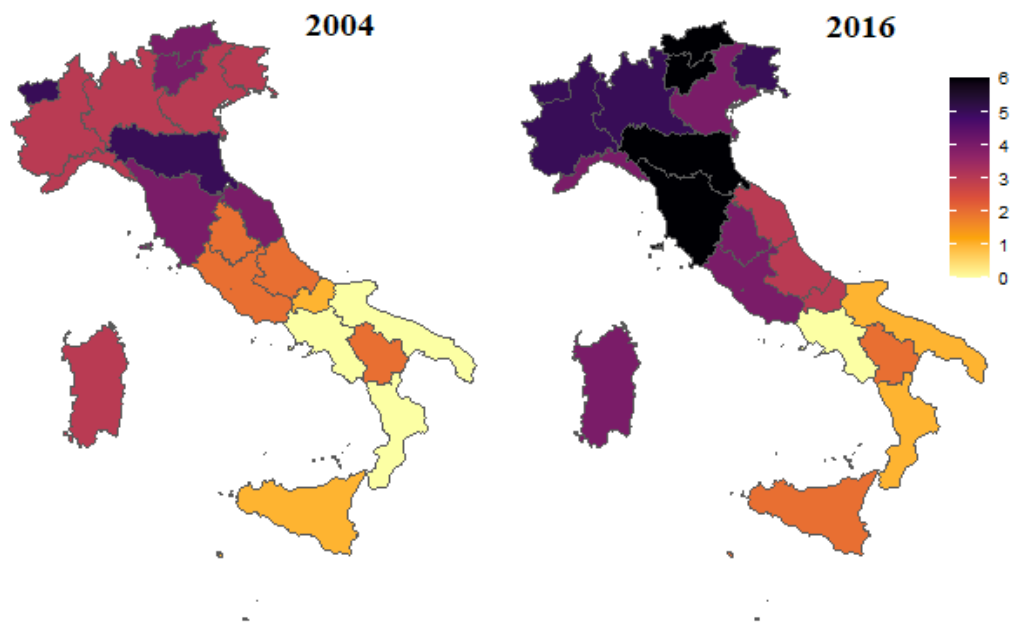
These three indicators are made available by Istat at the NUTS-2 level (i.e. twenty regional units). The indicator on the share of paid work is a measure of the percentage of dual-earner couples in the total number of couples in the region aged between 25 and 65 years old, with and without children. It stems from the Labor Force Survey and it is available from 2004 (Istat, 2023). During the period observed, the share of dual-earner couples ranged from about 20%, in Campania in 2011 and Sicily in 2014, to 60% in 2016 in Trentino Alto Adige. The indicator of the symmetry in the share of care and domestic work refers to dual-earner couples aged between 25 and 64 years old. It derives from the Time-Use Survey, conducted in the years 2003, 2008, and 2013. Each value for these three points in time was attributed to five years (the two years preceding the survey, and the two years following it), so as to build a time-series covering the entire 2004-2016 period. A perfect symmetry would be represented by 50, meaning that each partner attended to half of the care and domestic tasks. In Italian regions, this index ranges from 65 (Piedmont in 2012-2016) to 85 (Basilicata in 2004-2006), meaning that in all regions care and domestic work fell disproportionately on women, but with important regional differences. Finally, the indicator on the use of childcare measures the share of children aged less than 3 years old enrolled with childcare services in the total number of children of the same age. It ranges from about 2% in Calabria and Campania for the whole period, to about 55% in Aosta Valley in 2004. Full tables of these three indicators by region and year are displayed in Appendix A1.

In order to have a synthetic measure of gender equality, and since our three indicators were measured on different scales, first we coded them in three categories, identifying a context with lower gender equality when the value was below the 25th percentile of the distribution, and higher gender equality when the value was in the top 25th percentile; then, we built an additive

index (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.82$), ranging from 0 to 6, where 6 represent a higher level of gender equality.

The maps in Figure 1 show the regional variation in the gender equality index in 2004 and 2016 (the first and last year covered by this study). The maps clearly evidence the north-south divide, where northern and central regions have much higher gender equality scores compared to those in the south. Moreover, evident during the 13 years covered by this study, is a considerable increase in gender equality in northern and central regions, and a stagnation in many southern ones, polarizing the north-south divide.

Figure 1: Gender equality index in Italian regions in 2004 and 2016

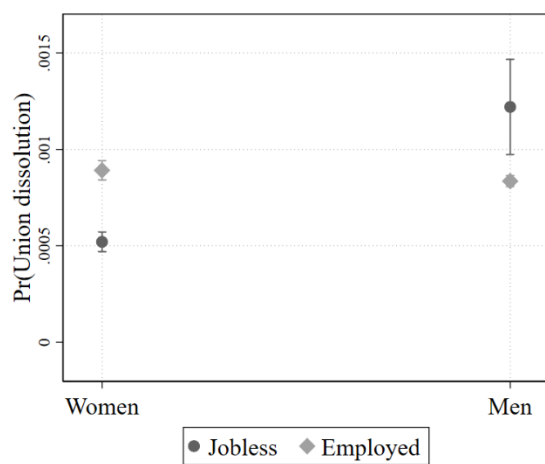


5. Results

In order to study the impact of the employment status of men and women on divorce risks in different gendered contexts, we first looked at the likelihood of union dissolution for women and men with different employment statuses, without accounting for the gender context. Then we added an interaction between employment status and the gender equality index, separately for women and men. The results are displayed in Figures 2 and 3 in the form of predicted (monthly) probabilities of union dissolution. The full table with the odd ratios for all models is available in the Appendix (Table A2).

Figure 2 evidences that, in line with the findings of previous research, without accounting for contextual characteristics (but controlling for a set of individual-level characteristics), employed women (light grey) have higher probabilities of union dissolution compared to jobless women (dark grey); by contrast, jobless men (dark grey) have higher probabilities of union dissolution compared to employed men (light grey). Interestingly, the figure shows that the risk of union dissolution for employed women and men is rather similar. What varies considerably between women and men is the role of joblessness, which is indeed an inhibitor for couple dissolution when it is the woman that is jobless, and a facilitator when it is the man.

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities of union dissolution by employment status and gender

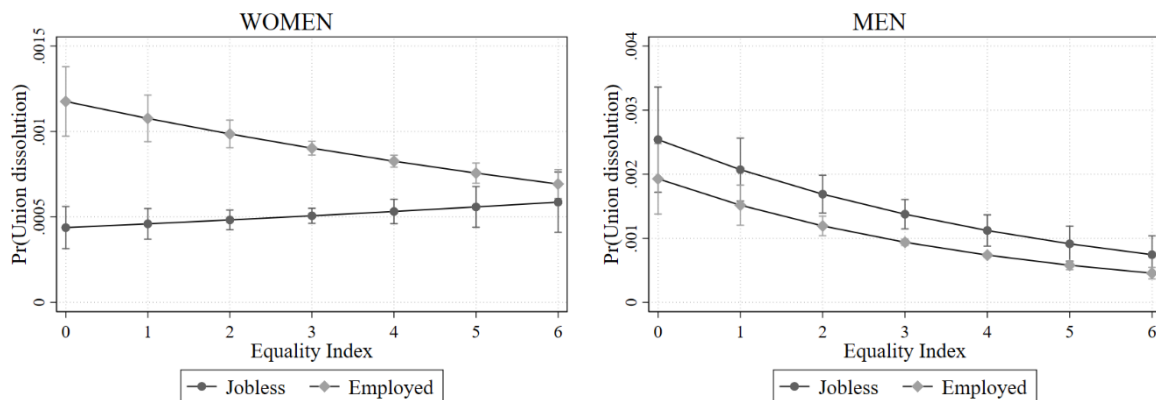


Note: controlled for union duration, region, cohort, marriage or cohabitation, number of children, parents' separation and education, and education. C.I. 83.5%

Figure 3 displays the interaction between employment status and the gender equality index, separately for women and men. The first rectangle shows women's predicted probabilities of union dissolution. In contexts with lower levels of gender equality, employed women have much higher dissolution probabilities than jobless women. However, on moving from regions with lower levels of gender equality to regions with higher levels of gender equality, we note that probabilities of union dissolution for employed women become significantly reduced. By contrast, on considering jobless women we note that, moving from regions with lower levels of gender equality to regions with higher gender equality, the probabilities of union dissolution slightly increase (although the increase is not statistically precise). Notably, as gender equality increases, differences in the probability of union dissolution between jobless and employed women gradually shrink, to the point that, in contexts with the highest equality level,

differences by employment status are no longer significant. For men (left rectangle), we observe that, generally, being jobless increases dissolution probabilities compared to being employed. Nevertheless, for both jobless and employed men moving from regions with lower levels of gender equality to regions with higher levels of gender equality, the probability of union dissolution significantly decreases. Thus, societal gender equality proves to be beneficial for men’s union stability as well. Moreover, considering differences between jobless and employed men, these too seem to diminish as gender equality increases (the differences, however, are statistically precise only for intermediate levels of gender equality scores). Overall, our results provide support for the idea that in contexts with low gender equality, women’s employment and men’s joblessness are disruptive for union stability because they clash with the gender behavior prevalent in that region. Indeed, on looking at contexts with higher gender equality, we find that employment status is no longer relevant, for both women and men, and gender differences in the relationship between employment status and union dissolution virtually vanish.

Figure 3: Predicted probabilities of union dissolution: interaction between employment status and gender equality index for women and men



Note: controlled for union duration, region, cohort, marriage or cohabitation, number of children, parents’ separation and education, and education. C.I. 83.5%

Additional analysis: the three dimensions of contextual gender equality

To provide further evidence on the role of each of the three gender dimensions, we estimated our models, interacting employment status separately with the share of dual-earner couples, the symmetry in the division of care and domestic work, and the share of children aged 0-3 in

childcare. The results are set out in Appendix A3. For each of the three indicators, the pattern is very similar and consistent with the theories outlined.

The results show that in context with a larger share of dual-earner couples, there is a significant reduction in the probabilities of union dissolution of employed women, and of both jobless and employed men, while there is a slight increase in the probability of union dissolution of jobless women. This supports the idea that, in contexts where the dual-earner model is the norm, women's employment is no longer disruptive for couples' stability. Moreover, men's employment status also becomes less important for couples' stability, probably because most couples can count on a second income.

Similarly, on considering the index of symmetry in domestic and care work, we found that, in more egalitarian regions, employed women see a significant reduction in their probabilities of union dissolution, while there is a small increase for jobless women. Again, for men, a higher symmetry in domestic and care work in the region is associated with lower union dissolution probabilities. Thus, this second dimension of gender equality also proves important in determining the gendered relationship between employment status and union dissolution; and because it is in the same direction as the first dimension, it suggests that when couples are more symmetrical in both spheres (the dual earner-dual carer model), tensions are lower.

Finally, on considering the use of childcare services for children aged less than 3 years old, we found a somewhat similar pattern. In contexts with a higher share of infants receiving childcare, the employment status of women and men is less decisive for couple stability. This finding is in line with those of studies which claim that greater policy support for equality reduces, and may even reverse, the relative divorce risk associated with a wife's employment (Cooke *et al.*, 2013), and that services reconciling work and family stabilize relationships (Lappegård *et al.*, 2020).

6. Conclusion and discussion

In many Western societies, men's and women's employment status has an opposite association with union dissolution because of prevailing traditional gender cultures and structures (Hansen, 2005; Killewald, 2016; Di Nallo *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, studies that directly address this question are few. This study brings novel empirical evidence into the existing debate by analyzing a context generally considered to be traditional in terms of family and gender

patterns, and by exploiting the wide differences in the gender division of paid and unpaid work among regions.

In line with previous research on the Italian context, we confirm that, without accounting for contextual gender equality, the relationship between employment status and union dissolution in Italy is gender-specific: joblessness is an inhibitor for women's dissolutions and a facilitator for men's dissolutions. Nevertheless, our results clearly show that, as contextual gender equality increases, differences by employment status diminish, and gender differences in the relationship between employment status and union dissolution virtually disappear. Importantly, we show that, as gender equality increases, women's employment becomes less detrimental for union stability, to the extent that, in our most egalitarian context, differences by employment status are no longer relevant. Moreover, we find that aggregate gender equality is also beneficial for men's union stability, regardless of the employment status. Moving from contexts with lower gender equality to contexts with higher gender equality, the only group with a slight increase in the probability of union dissolution is the one consisting of jobless women. Arguably, this is partly due to the change in the composition of this group in contexts with different levels of gender equality. Indeed, in contexts with low gender equality, many jobless women are likely to be housewives, so that joblessness is their 'choice', while in contexts with higher equality, they are more likely to be involuntarily unemployed, and thus more similar in composition to jobless men.

According to previous evidence, in more egalitarian societies employment should be linked to more stable unions, while joblessness should increase the risk of union dissolution in the same way for women and men (Jalovaara, 2003). This would imply a reversal in the relationship between employment status and union dissolution for women as societies become more egalitarian (as has been found in some European countries, see e.g. Di Nallo, et al. 2021). Although a reversal is not yet evident for Italian women – probably because the gender revolution is still far from complete even in the country's most egalitarian contexts, but also partly due to the impossibility to distinguish inactivity from unemployment – our results point in this direction. Moreover, our analysis showed that in contexts with higher equality, neither women's nor men's joblessness is linked to a greater risk of union dissolution, and differences by employment status simply vanish. This suggests that in more egalitarian contexts joblessness is less disruptive for union stability for both men and women, probably because it does not reflect as badly on men's expected gender role, and because most couples can rely on two earners, that is, on a second source of income if one of the two partners is unemployed.

Our study has its limitations. First, because the survey consulted did not include information on ex-partners, we were unable to explore both sides of the couples in the analysis. Accordingly, we could control only for the respondent's information in predicting dissolution risk. Moreover, we had no information on the division of unpaid work within couples, or on individuals' gender ideology. However, it has been suggested that information about both partners' contributions to paid and unpaid work is needed to properly assess the effect of women's employment on union dissolution (Sigle-Rushton, 2010; Oláh and Gahler, 2014; Mencarini and Vignoli, 2018; Thielemans, Fallesen and Mortelmans, 2021). Finally, the data did not allow us to distinguish unemployment from inactivity. Although joblessness has been proved to be a valid indicator of employment instability in family research (Härkönen, 2011; Busetta, Mendola and Vignoli, 2019), we acknowledge that unemployment and inactivity may have different roles in defining gender differences.

Despite these limitations, on using the best available data on the Italian context, and exploiting regional differences, we found that even in a country generally considered static and traditional in terms of family and gender dynamics, the gender revolution is progressing – at least in northern and central regions – and the role of employment status in the prediction of union dissolution is changing. Indeed, our findings show that in Italian regions with higher levels of aggregate gender equality, differences by employment status are no longer relevant, and gender differences in the relationship between employment status and union dissolution virtually vanish. Our research therefore provides support for theories claiming that gender differences in the relationship between employment status and union dissolution depend on the gender context.

7. References

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Appendix A1 – Gender context indicators by region and year

Table 1: % of dual-earner couples in the region

NUTS-2 Regions		2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
North	Piedmont	47.0	48.2	50.3	50.7	51.7	50.2	49.9	50.6	51.0	50.0	49.9	51.7	53.2
	Aosta Valley	52.0	52.0	52.0	52.0	52.0	52.0	56.0	54.2	54.2	50.0	56.5	52.2	52.2
	Lombardy	48.8	48.7	50.7	51.0	50.8	50.6	50.5	50.2	50.6	51.5	52.1	52.4	53.7
	Trentino-Alto Adige	51.6	51.3	51.8	53.1	54.4	55.2	55.4	55.1	55.3	57.7	58.2	59.5	60.0
	Veneto	45.7	47.2	48.1	48.1	50.5	49.5	49.4	49.9	49.9	48.8	50.4	49.6	50.2
	Friuli	46.4	48.0	50.4	51.6	51.8	49.2	49.0	51.0	50.8	50.2	51.1	49.8	50.6
	Liguria	43.1	42.9	46.4	47.6	48.8	48.8	49.0	48.8	46.6	45.4	46.5	50.8	51.1
	Emilia-Romagna	54.3	54.7	56.2	57.5	57.3	56.2	54.9	55.9	56.0	55.1	54.9	55.2	58.0
	Centre	Tuscany	48.0	48.0	49.3	49.9	50.7	49.7	49.1	48.4	50.3	51.3	51.7	53.6
Umbria		46.2	46.2	46.8	49.4	50.6	48.0	48.3	46.8	45.8	47.0	46.7	48.8	49.1
Marche		49.5	49.2	49.0	49.8	51.9	50.8	49.7	47.6	48.7	48.3	50.7	49.7	48.5
Lazio		40.4	41.7	41.6	41.9	43.4	42.6	42.8	43.2	43.2	43.2	44.6	43.7	45.7
South	Abruzzo	40.5	41.2	41.6	40.3	43.4	39.1	39.1	41.2	40.7	39.8	38.7	39.2	38.8
	Molise	34.9	33.3	33.9	36.1	37.1	35.5	33.9	33.3	33.9	31.7	32.2	35.0	35.6
	Campania	24.4	22.5	23.8	23.1	22.4	21.3	21.6	20.7	21.7	22.1	21.9	22.2	23.7
	Apulia	23.8	22.4	23.8	24.5	24.4	23.2	22.9	23.5	24.4	23.7	24.1	25.0	25.3
	Basilicata	31.4	32.2	31.6	29.9	30.2	30.4	31.3	29.3	29.6	31.0	31.3	31.3	33.0
	Calabria	28.9	27.7	28.2	26.2	26.0	25.3	26.1	26.4	23.9	22.5	21.4	21.5	23.4
	Sicily	23.1	24.2	25.5	24.6	24.5	24.2	23.5	23.0	22.7	21.7	20.8	21.5	21.8
	Sardinia	32.0	31.5	32.0	33.9	33.8	32.5	32.6	35.2	34.6	31.2	30.4	33.8	35.1

Legend: Low <=30% - High >= 51 %

Source: Labor Force Survey (LFS) Istat, own elaboration

Table 2: Index of symmetry in the share of domestic and care work in dual-earner couples

NUTS-2 Regions		2004-2006	2007-2011	2012-2016
North	Piedmont	71.4	68.9	65.3
	Aosta Valley	73.9	78.4	71.7
	Lombardy	75	71.5	66.2
	Trentino-Alto Adige/South Tyrol	75	72.3	69.3
	Veneto	71.4	70.5	67.5
	Friuli	72.6	68.9	66.6
	Liguria	75.7	72.8	71.1
	Emilia-Romagna	71.6	71.3	67.5
	Centre	Tuscany	73.9	74.1
Umbria		76.4	74.3	66.7
Marche		73.8	70.9	71.5
Lazio		77.4	76.4	69.8
South	Abruzzo	81.4	76.9	75.3
	Molise	78.5	79.9	73.5
	Campania	82.1	75	76.9
	Apulia	81.3	75.9	78.9
	Basilicata	85	79.7	77.7
	Calabria	80.6	81.8	75.9
	Sicily	78.4	80.9	74.2
	Sardinia	76	70.2	69.3

Legend: Low > 76 – High ≤ 70

Source: Time Use Survey 2002-2003, 2007-2008, 2012-2013 (ISTAT), own elaboration

Table 3: % of children aged between 0- and 3-years old using childcare services

NUTS-2 Regions		2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
North	Piedmont	13.6	13.5	14.9	14.3	14.5	14.9	15.6	15.3	13.2	13.5	12.4	12.2	12.4
	Aosta Valley	56.5	40.1	25.4	24	28.3	25.6	27.6	21.7	20.4	22.2	24.6	24.7	22.6
	Lombardy	15.6	13.8	14.9	15.9	16.6	18.9	19.3	18.1	16.8	17	15.5	15	15.6
	Trentino-Alto Adige/South Tyrol	12.3	12.5	12.4	14.5	15.1	17.1	19.7	17.5	18	19.4	18.8	20.1	20.9
	Veneto	10.9	10.7	12.6	11.4	12	12.6	12.7	13.3	10.4	10.8	10	10	10.5
	Friuli	9.4	10.9	12.3	15.4	15	17.9	20.4	21.1	15.5	19.9	21.9	20.3	22.2
	Liguria	16	16.8	16.4	15.5	17	16.8	17	17.6	15.6	15.7	14.6	14.8	15.1
	Emilia-Romagna	27.6	28.2	27.7	28.3	28.3	29.9	29.9	27.2	26.8	26.2	25.6	25.3	25.3
	Centre	Tuscany	24.1	20	22.2	21.6	21.7	20.6	21.3	20.8	21.8	21.6	21.7	22.2
Umbria		13.8	13.8	14	15	23.5	28	28	23.8	15.4	15.8	15.2	15.9	15.8
Marche		23.3	17.2	15	15.5	16	16.2	17.1	17.2	16.5	15.7	16.5	15.9	16
Lazio		9.4	10.4	11.1	12.1	12.8	13.9	15.4	17.3	17.3	16.3	17.1	17	16.9
South	Abruzzo	6.8	7.2	7.2	8.7	9.9	10.2	9.8	9.9	9.8	10.1	10.1	9	8.4
	Molise	3.2	3.9	4.8	4.8	4.8	5.4	5.5	11.3	10.4	8.6	10.7	10.9	11.8
	Campania	1.7	2.1	1.8	2.2	2.8	2.8	2.8	2.9	2.6	2.7	2.6	3	3.6
	Apulia	5	5.2	4.4	4.6	4.9	5	4.6	4.6	4.3	4.5	5.3	6.4	6.5
	Basilicata	5.1	5.6	5.4	6.9	6.8	7.8	7.6	7.5	6.9	6.5	6.6	6.3	6.9
	Calabria	2.1	2.3	2.4	2	2.7	3.5	2.4	2.5	2.1	1.4	1.2	2	2.2
	Sicily	6	6.4	6.3	5.5	6	5.3	5.6	5.5	5.5	5	4.6	4.8	5.2
	Sardinia	10	9.1	8.7	9.4	10	13.3	17.3	13.1	12.9	10.7	10.7	10.4	11.3

Legend: Low <= 5% - High >= 20%

Source: ISTAT, own elaboration

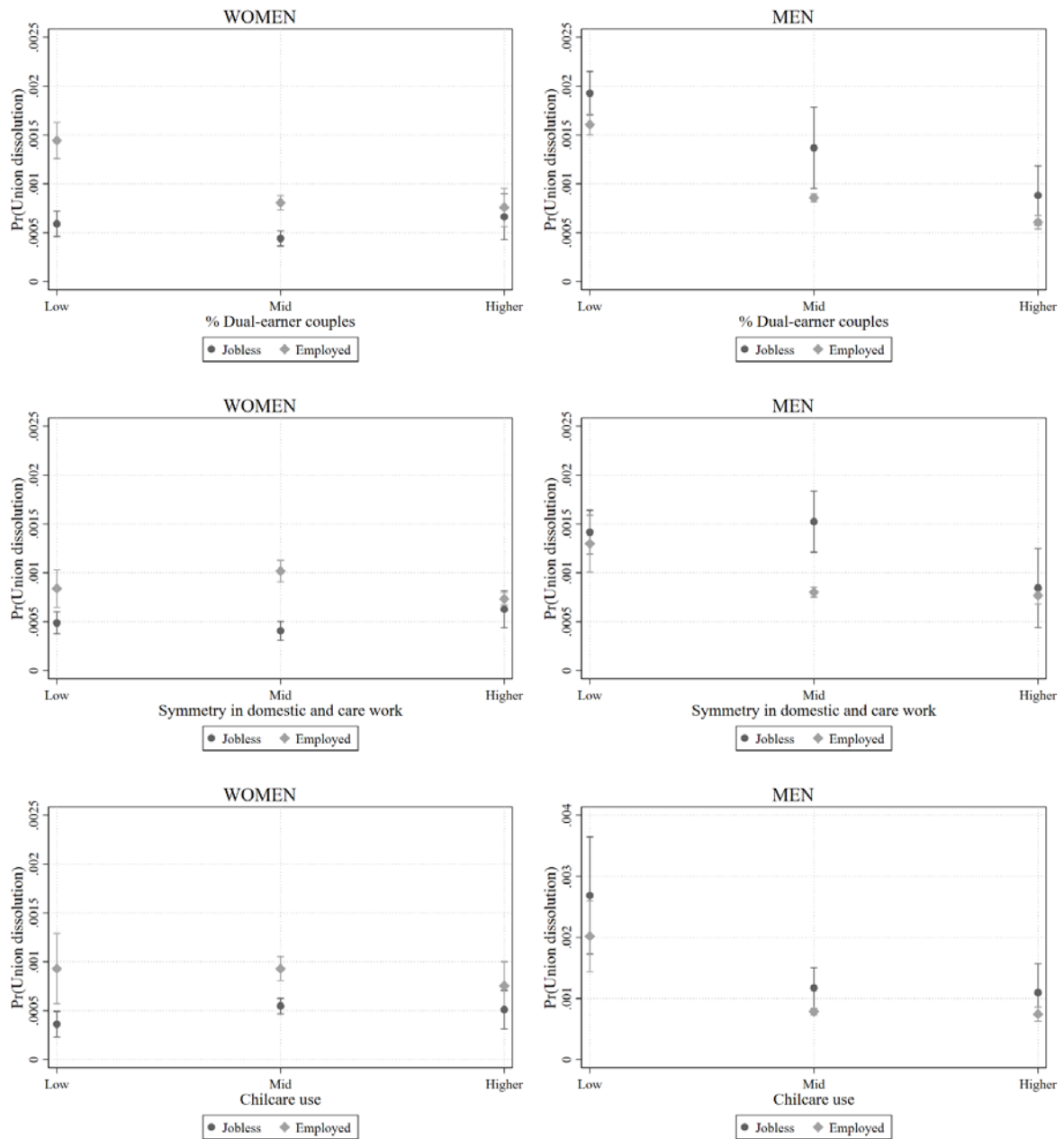
Appendix A2: Discrete-time event history model on the likelihood of separation

VARIABLES	Women		Men	
	(1)	(2)	(1)	(2)
Union duration (Ref. 0-2 years)				
3-7 years	1.67*** (0.267)	1.67*** (0.268)	1.03 (0.099)	1.03 (0.098)
8-15 years	1.64*** (0.270)	1.64*** (0.272)	0.91 (0.134)	0.91 (0.134)
15+ years	1.96*** (0.282)	1.97*** (0.285)	1.15 (0.244)	1.16 (0.242)
Birth cohort (Ref. 1950-1959)				
1960-1969	2.15*** (0.616)	2.16*** (0.621)	2.30*** (0.508)	2.30*** (0.510)
1970-1997	3.78*** (0.848)	3.82*** (0.864)	2.79*** (0.620)	2.80*** (0.621)
Cohabitation (Ref. Marriage)				
	3.04*** (0.375)	3.08*** (0.389)	3.66*** (0.450)	3.66*** (0.449)
Children (Ref. childless)				
1	0.56*** (0.070)	0.56*** (0.070)	0.41*** (0.053)	0.41*** (0.053)
2	0.51*** (0.067)	0.51*** (0.066)	0.35*** (0.041)	0.34*** (0.040)
3	0.47*** (0.125)	0.47*** (0.124)	0.32*** (0.082)	0.32*** (0.082)
More than 3	0.27** (0.175)	0.26** (0.170)	0.31 (0.227)	0.30 (0.226)
Parents do not live together				
	1.48* (0.326)	1.48* (0.324)	1.29* (0.180)	1.29* (0.180)
At least one parent is highly educated				
	1.33* (0.193)	1.33** (0.189)	1.64*** (0.220)	1.64*** (0.217)
Education (Ref. Low)				
Mid	1.13 (0.129)	1.12 (0.128)	0.95 (0.099)	0.95 (0.099)
High	1.06 (0.135)	1.04 (0.131)	0.78* (0.106)	0.78* (0.106)
Employed (Ref. Jobless)				
	1.80*** (0.209)	2.69*** (0.768)	0.70** (0.107)	0.77 (0.139)
Gender equality index				
	0.98 (0.045)	1.09 (0.058)	0.72*** (0.059)	0.74*** (0.073)
Employed*Gender equality				
		0.87* (0.072)		0.96 (0.055)
Year	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Region	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Individuals	6,017	6,017	5,361	5,361
Person-months	769,808	769,808	652,457	652,457
Dissolutions	608	608	580	580

Robust s.e. in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.10

Appendix A3: Additional analysis separately for the three contextual indicators

Figure A3: Predicted probabilities of union dissolution for jobless and employed women and men, interaction with gender context



Note: All gender context indicators are coded as LOW when they are below the 25th percentile, and HIGHER when they are above the 25th percentile of the distribution. All models are controlled for union duration, cohort, marriage or cohabitation, number of children, parents' separation and education, education, gender context variables, region and year.

