


Gender Essentialism at Work? The Case of Norwegian Childcare Workers

Mette Løvgren  ^{1,*} and Julia Orupabo²

We examine the influence of gender essentialism, a key explanation of gender segregation in the labor market, by zooming in on childcare work, which remains a female-dominated occupation. Building on the assumption that gender essentialism is expressed through people's perceptions of what jobs and tasks are suitable for men and women, we ask the following question: are childcare workers gender essentialists? We answer this question by investigating the attitudes and work-task participation of 2,549 Norwegian childcare workers. The results show that the workers did not display gender-essentialist attitudes. Male and female workers reported significantly different levels of participation in some work tasks, but the main conclusion is that gender is not an organizing principle of work-task participation. These results contradict findings from previous studies and contribute to ongoing debates about the causes of segregation because attitudes and behaviors are often evoked as explanations for the status quo.

Introduction

Labor markets in the Western world are distinctly segregated by gender. Despite the reversal of the gender gap in educational attainment and women's achievements in employment, men and women continue to occupy different positions in the labor market (England 2010). Even in egalitarian welfare states, such as the Nordic countries, segregation levels are high and remain stable (Jensberg, Mandal, and Solheim 2012; Reisel and Teigen 2014). To explain this, scholars highlight the mechanism of *gender essentialism*, the cultural belief that men and women differ fundamentally and innately in their abilities and interests. This view holds that because men and women seek to express their essential selves, the labor force will continue to be segregated by gender (Charles and Bradley 2009; Levanon and Grusky 2016). Gender essentialism is even more pronounced in economically advanced societies, in which

¹Centre for Welfare and Labour Research, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway
Institute for Social Research, Oslo, Norway
*mettelo@oslomet.no

individuals are encouraged to express their true selves when making educational choices. A key argument on the part of these studies is that gendered pathways into education and work interact with self-expression ideals, further cementing the gendered labor market (Charles and Bradley 2009).

A considerable number of empirical studies, mostly qualitative, on gendered hierarchies in gender-segregated occupations have found that organizations are gendered and that this gendering affects men and women differently (Ashcraft and Ashcraft 2015; McDowell 2009; Williams 1992, 2006). However, fewer studies have examined whether individuals in gender-segregated occupations hold gender-essentialist beliefs. Quantitative studies of gender segregation in terms of work have identified gendered occupational outcomes (Charles and Bradley 2009) and gendered preferences among children (Hayes, Bigler, and Weisgram, 2018; Liben, Bigler, and Krogh, 2001) and students (Buchmann and Kriesi 2009; Seehuus 2019) who have not yet entered the labor market. Thus, the preferences and attitudes of those who occupy positions in gender-segregated spheres of the labor market remain incompletely understood.

In this study, we focus on men and women who have *already* made an occupational choice and explore the gendered preferences and behavior of childcare workers, a sector that is more than 90 percent female. We argue that, to truly understand the mechanisms of segregation, social scientists must go beyond theoretical assumptions that characterize the preferences of individuals in gender-segregated occupations and empirically investigate the hypothesis of essentialism in a working population. Building on a large sample of Norwegian childcare workers, this study offers insights into the attitudes and behaviors of workers at the extreme end of the gender-segregated labor market in a country characterized by both a high degree of gender equality and a segregated labor market. If essentialism is at play among individuals who enter a female-dominated occupation, we expect, first, to find the expression of stereotypical attitudes toward gender (women are caring and suited to childcare) among the workers. Second, building on previous work on how men benefit from their token status in female-dominated occupations (Simpson 2004; Williams 1992), we also expect to find an internal division of work tasks between male and female childcare workers.

The main finding of the present paper is that these workers are not accurately described as gender essentialists and that the work-task participation differences between male and female workers are small or nonexistent. This contradicts the findings of previous studies that have investigated attitudes and work-task division among childcare workers and the common belief that childcare work is innately gendered (Kasin and Slåtten 2011; Peeters, Rohrmann, and Emilsen, 2015; Van Laere et al. 2014). In light of these findings, we argue that, while gender-segregated labor markets may be interlinked with gender structures in modern societies, individually held gender-essential

beliefs do not appear to be the determining factor for the female majority of workers in the daycare sector in Norway.¹

Gender Essentialism, Attitudes, and Work Tasks

The literature on gender essentialism argues that cultural gender beliefs position men and women as fundamentally and innately different; for instance, women are naturally better at nurturing and interpersonal relations, and men are more analytical and better with things (Levanon and Grusky 2016). Gender essentialism is expressed through people's perceptions of what jobs and tasks are suitable for men and women. Thus, these beliefs function as an invisible hand that produces and reproduces a gender-segregated labor market. When women conceptualize themselves in gendered ways, for example, as people-oriented, this will lead to gendered career choices (female-typed occupations). As Charles and Bradley (2009) have argued, by viewing ourselves as gendered, we create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thus, occupational choices are understood as something that is made on the basis of what is meaningful and adequate in relation to gender identity and may even strengthen an individual's gender identity by confirming their conceptions of what a "real man" or a "real woman" is (Bloksgaard 2011). Even in the most liberal-egalitarian contexts, such as Norway, some argue that individuals understand their own competencies in terms of standard essentialist ideas because gender essentialism promotes a "different but equal" segregation regime (Charles and Bradley 2009; England 2010).

Despite the considerable number of empirical studies that address the relevance of gender essentialism among individuals who occupy a gender-segregated occupation, most studies have been qualitative (Bloksgaard 2011; Van Laere et al. 2014). Although these studies find that gender-essentialist beliefs function as a mechanism that produces and maintains the gender imbalance in these occupations, few studies have approached this topic using statistical methods to investigate whether workers in gender-segregated occupation hold gender-essentialist beliefs. Building on a large sample of Norwegian childcare workers, the purpose of this paper is to fill this gap by examining the occurrence of gender essentialism among childcare workers. More precisely, we investigated two key questions. First, the relationship between essentialism and workers' *attitudes*—that is, perceptions regarding which gender is seen as suitable to perform different tasks—and, second, the relationship between essentialism and workers' *practices*—the actual division of work between male and female workers.

In the following section, we describe two different but intertwined mechanisms that highlight culture and essentialism in producing and upholding a gender-segregated labor market. By distinguishing between these, we

scrutinize various perspectives on why jobs are associated with gender to explain how essentialism is connected to the gender typing of childcare work.

Feminized Skills—Work Summons Bodies

A key assumption in much work on gender segregation is that *work summons bodies* (Ashcraft and Ashcraft 2015). When work and bodies become aligned, this can be explained by examining the *content and tasks* of an occupation. Care and emotional labor in childcare work are modeled on the notion of motherhood, a modeling that lends legitimacy to the institution (Peeters 2007). Care labor is perceived as an extension of women's natural character as empathetic and their domestic role as caregivers (England, Budig, and Folbre 2002). The essentialist perspective claims that it is precisely the gendering of tasks and jobs that enables individuals to choose occupations based on their gendered identity. Women choose feminine-typed work because this line of work is thought to be suited to women's essential nature and enables women to feel that they can express their femininity through work (Charles and Bradley 2009; Charles and Grusky 2004). Essentialist conceptions of gender are seen as key explanations for the gender imbalance in childcare work (Peeters, Rohrmann, and Emilsen, 2015). Qualitative studies using methods such as in-depth interviews or case studies provide important insights into the gendered understandings, evaluations, and work practices of childcare workers. Despite political efforts to recruit men, the idea that caring for the youngest implies an activity "that women naturally do" remains dominant (Van Laere et al. 2014). The existing literature finds that childcare workers believe that their work is of a gendered nature and that women are better suited than men to performing such work, either as a result of gender socialization or biological traits (Cameron 2006; Moss et al. 1999). *Based on the theory of essentialism and previous studies of childcare workers, our first hypothesis is that childcare workers express gender-essentialist beliefs by reporting that different work tasks are suitable for men as compared to women.*

Several studies have also illustrated how gender essentialism is expressed at a very detailed level *within* occupations (Levanon and Grusky 2016). Although some men enter female-dominated occupations, men and women perform different tasks in those occupations. Using the concept of the "glass escalator"—a concept that illuminates men's advantages—studies have shown that men do not suffer from being the gender minority. Quite to the contrary, men earn more, work in more prestigious fields, and are often pushed into management positions when employed in female-dominated occupations (Evans 1997; Simpson 2004; Williams 1992). Studies that have investigated the role of men within childcare work have found many of the same phenomena. The notion of childcare work as being innately gendered manifests itself in the forming of a relationship between worker and child, that is, physical intimacy and emotional bonding, and in the distribution of work tasks among

workers (Cameron 2006; Cameron, Owen, and Moss 1999; Sumsion 2000; Kim and Reifel 2010; Murray 1996). In a Nordic context, qualitative studies have demonstrated how childcare workers evoked a gender-essentialist understanding of male and female childcare workers, their respective work attributes, and the sharing of work tasks among male and female employees (Kasin and Slåtten 2011; Nordberg 2005). Although care workers disapprove of the gender stereotyping of children, they draw on gender-essential beliefs when they describe how male and female childcare workers perform different tasks and posit complementarian competences (Kasin and Slåtten 2011). In certain activities, such as carpentry, when initiated by a male worker, the distinctiveness of male workers is postulated as a desirable and complementary trait as compared to the traits of female workers. In contrast, the initiative of a female worker to engage children in carpentry was described as “not the same” (Nordberg 2005). Following this line of argument, gender-essentialist beliefs that involve associating care work with women’s skills and identity will also be expressed in task divisions among male and female childcare workers. *Based on these previous studies, our second hypothesis is that male and female childcare workers participate in different work tasks.*

Feminized Workers—Bodies Define Work

Another key assumption in the literature on gender segregation is that the *incumbents* of occupations define work (Ashcraft and Ashcraft 2015). Studies have shown that the gender of individuals who typically perform an occupation influences the occupational interests of children. Both girls and boys are more interested in jobs depicted by same-gender workers (Hayes, Bigler, and Weisgram 2018). To explain the gender-essentialist typing of different jobs and tasks, this literature emphasizes the nominal association between bodies and work. Niches within the labor market that are filled by workers who share a trait, such as a certain gender or ethnicity, become associated with that particular social group, thereby causing members of the group to be viewed as suitable for the kind of work in question (Carter 2003; Orupabo and Nadim 2020). Thus, actual practitioners (female workers) influence how childcare work is perceived as specifically female. Following this argument, the social identification of an occupation as “women’s work” will change as the number of men in the occupation increases. With this as our stepping stone, we ask the following question: *do women in all-female childcare centers express different attitudes and report different work-task participation than women in childcare centers with one or more male employees?*

In sum, the literature review illustrated that gender essentialism relates not only to the preferences and identities of individuals but also to the social identities of various occupations. Gender-essentialist beliefs are produced and reproduced by the gendering of the incumbents of occupations (feminized

workers) and tasks (feminized skills), processes that may simultaneously maintain the symbolic association between women and childcare work.

However, although men and women make different occupational choices, resulting in a gender-segregated labor market, their choices cannot necessarily be explained by gender essentialism (cf. [Sayer 2000](#)). Critics of the explanatory power of gender essentialism have questioned a “language of choice” that attributes gendered occupational outcomes to the choices and culture of the women themselves. As pointed out by [Reskin and Maroto \(2011\)](#), when working-class women occupy socially devalued female jobs, this is not because something in the culture makes them want to express their true gendered selves but, rather, because of structural constraints. The pathways to gender-typical work may also reflect a lack of opportunities and immobility among disadvantaged groups ([Bergmann 2011](#); [Hodges 2020](#)). With these opposing views in mind, we continue to outline the Norwegian context and the data and methods utilized before we present our analyses and reflect on our results.

Gender, the Labor Market, and Childcare in Norway

Common measures of social and economic equality place Scandinavian countries—of which Norway is one—among the most egalitarian countries in the world ([Barth, Moene, and Wallerstein 2003](#)). Norway is a welfare state that regulates almost every aspect of work, including organizational factors such as salary, vacation, sick leave, and quality of work environment, and its labor market is characterized by high union coverage and extensive government intervention ([Kahn 2011](#)). Female labor market participation in Norway is high (over 72 percent) ([OECD 2020](#)); this can be partly explained by the availability of childcare to children younger than three years ([Thévenon 2013](#)). A symmetrical family model in which women and men share paid and unpaid work equally is a national political objective. However, despite high gender equality ambitions, Norway has a strongly gender-segregated labor market, with high numbers of women working in the public sector (health, social work, and education) and high numbers of men working in the private sector (manufacturing and finance) ([Reisel and Teigen 2014](#)). Furthermore, in Norway, as in many other countries, female-dominated occupations pay lower wages than those dominated by males ([Barth and Dale-Olsen 2009](#)).

The worldwide childcare labor force is predominantly female; in most countries, including Norway, more than 90 percent of childcare employees are female ([Engel, Anders, and Taguma 2015](#)). In Norway, explanations for the low share of male workers in daycare often revolve around the workers and the work culture of daycare centers. In a pamphlet distributed to all Norwegian childcare centers that addresses the recruitment and continued employment of male workers, the main explanation for the low number of

male applicants is the alleged prevalence of a women's culture in daycare centers. Culturally, caring for children is the responsibility of mothers. Female childcare workers conform to this norm by emphasizing or constructing similarities between home and motherhood and the daycare center. One consequence of this is the alienation of male workers. Furthermore, male workers do not take to the caring and nurturing aspects of childcare as easily as women do (Ministry of Education and Research 2006). Increasing the share of male childcare workers is of interest to both policymakers and childcare professionals. As identified by Sumsion (2005), policymakers and scholars argue that increasing the share of male childcare workers potentially provides three benefits: society as a whole gains via changing gender norms and attitudes, the childcare profession gains through increased status and wages, and the children benefit from positive male role models. Men are believed to possess different traits than women; thus, the presence of male childcare workers will enrich children's learning and care environments by supplementing the qualities of female childcare workers (Sumsion 2005). The demand for more male workers, expressed through arguments such as these, is common in most countries that place importance on the role of childcare institutions.

Thus, gender-essentialist beliefs about childcare work (a feminine culture) are not only relevant in explaining men's limited movement into female-dominated occupations (segregation). Essentialist beliefs about men's identities and culture are also consistent with the attempts at the desegregation and de-feminization of the occupation. Such assumptions, that women and men are fundamentally and innately different, warrant a careful study of the attitudes and divisions of work among male and female childcare workers.

Data and Methods

Respondents and Procedure

Two datasets were utilized in these analyses: one collected from employees (professionals and assistants) and one collected from childcare center managers. The employee dataset included 2,549 respondents from 588 randomly selected daycare centers; of those, 2,300 were women, and 133 were men (115 missing). The daycare centers included both public and private daycare centers, excluding centers in family homes and unstaffed, parent-supervised centers; 58 percent of the centers responded. The manager of each center selected respondents, and their instructions were to invite one to three professionals and one to three assistants to participate in the study. This was because the main aim of the study was to investigate the role of a professional in an occupation numerically dominated by untrained staff. The main body of the questionnaire investigated this topic. The manager dataset mapped the characteristics of each center, such as the number and age of children, ownership structure, available outdoor play area, number of staff (professionals and

untrained), and number of male and female workers. The last of these is used in the analyses given below in [tables 4](#) and [5](#) to identify centers with and without male employees and thus compare the attitudes and work-task participation of female workers in centers with and without male colleagues.

Participation in the study was informed and voluntary. The collected dataset ensured the anonymity of the respondents because it did not contain data that, by itself or in combination with data from other sources, could be used to identify individuals or centers.

Variables

We used two sets of dependent variables in the analysis: attitudes regarding whether men or women are considered best suited to performing certain work-tasks and self-reported participation in those work tasks, with answer categories ranging from Never to Often. Gender-essentialist beliefs were operationalized as follows: if the respondent held a gender-essentialist view, different work tasks would be considered best suited for men or women. The response categories to the first question—“Here is a list of work tasks that may be carried out in a childcare center. Do you consider these tasks to be best suited to men or women, or do you consider them equally suited for both men and women?”—are (i) best suited to women; (ii) slightly more suited to women; (iii) equally suited to both; (iv) slightly more suited to men; and (v) best suited to men. For the second question—“To what extent are you involved in the following work tasks at your job?”—responses ranged from 1, Never, to 5, Often. In this analysis, Categories 1 and 2 are referred to as female bias, and Categories 4 and 5 are referred to as male bias. Gender-equal attitudes are operationalized as the middle category, Category 3. The histograms shown in [figures 1](#) and [2](#) (see Results below) demonstrate that there is very limited variation in the attitude variables (the answers are centered on 3) and the distributions are distinctive for the various participation variables. For both types of variables, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression analysis works well because it is able to capture small differences around the middle category for attitudes and works with all the various distributions of the participation variables. Therefore, we chose to proceed with OLS.

The dependent variables covered a wide range of work tasks, including parental contact; intimate physical contact with children; and gender-stereotyped tasks, such as cleaning and physical activities. Rather than constructing an index, each item is included as is. While indices have the benefit of reducing measurement error, the potential value of identifying specific gender-contested tasks outweighs the risk of instability associated with single-item measures.

Explanatory variables. The explanatory variables of primary interest are gender (whether the respondent reports being male or female) and the

presence of male colleagues, which is included as a dummy variable, with 0 indicating no male workers and 1 indicating one or more male workers. This variable was measured at the level of daycare centers, meaning that the data were collected from the managers at the workplaces of each respondent. To account for the fact that observations were not independent across childcare centers, we clustered the standard errors at the center level.

A third explanatory variable of interest is position, which indicates both work responsibilities and educational background. Position and an interaction term of gender and position are included in case gender correlates differently with either side of the occupational boundary (professional or nonprofessional). Three types of positions are common in Norwegian daycare centers: managers, pedagogical leaders (professionals), and assistants (nonprofessionals). The nonprofessionals outnumber the professionals two to one, a ratio that meets staffing regulations.

Control variables. Other factors that could confound the observed differences between men and women and differences across childcare centers were included: the age of the respondent and their work experience measured in years. At the level of the daycare center, the number of employees was included so that the main explanatory variables were not conflated with the size of the daycare center, because large centers are likely to have at least one male worker.

Limitations

Recruitment to the study was left to center managers, with the only instructions being those stated in the Respondents and Procedures section. The selection criteria applied, other than occupational status, are unknown. We do expect sampling bias on the part of the manager to be related to the topic of professionals versus assistants, for example, because of managers inviting the most experienced assistants to participate. We tested for the over- and underrepresentation of male workers and found a positive correlation between the number of male staff members at the center and male participants in the study. In centers where male workers were present, they participated in the study in 10 percent of cases. It does not appear to be the case that male workers were overrepresented.

In addition to selection bias, we will focus on the response scale for work-task participation. This was relative, meaning that the two ends of the scale are Never and Often, rather than absolute, for example, the number of times during the day or week. Assistants who do not have parental meetings as part of their job descriptions may have a different frame of reference when asked if they perform a task often. While the job descriptions of male and female workers are identical, gendered expectations and norms may influence men's and women's frames of reference differently, resulting in a systematic bias

between male and female workers in their responses regarding how often they perform certain work tasks.

Results

Characteristics of Male and Female Workers

Table 1 presents the characteristics of male and female workers, their self-reported participation in work tasks, and their attitudes toward the distribution of such tasks among men and women. Starting with attitudes, the physical activity task (in the questionnaire, examples are “running, playing ball games, climbing, etc.”) is the only work task male childcare workers reported that they were (slightly) better suited to perform than female workers. This was also the only attitude item for which the group means differed; male respondents reported a slightly higher male bias than female respondents. For a visual presentation of the descriptive statistics, see figure 1.

Turning to work tasks, physical activities are the only task that men report participating more frequently than women do. One work task showed no significant difference in group mean: addressing parents on a sensitive topic. As for the remaining tasks, female respondents reported participating in these tasks more often than male respondents. Another point of interest in table 1 is the difference between the reported attitudes and the self-reported participation frequency of male and female childcare workers. Although the workers did not report gender-essentialist beliefs, the male and female workers differed in their self-reported work-task participation. For a visual presentation of the descriptive statistics, see figure 2. We do not have data on whether the work tasks are assigned, claimed, or negotiated, so the mechanisms behind this discrepancy are difficult to distinguish. However, because we found significant differences in the group means of male and female workers, we can say that gender is relevant to the allocation of work tasks.

In sum, male and female childcare workers differed significantly in age and work experience. These characteristics are regressed on both participation in work tasks and attitudes toward the gender distribution of such tasks.

Regression Analyses

Because table 1 reports only mean differences, the displayed discrepancies in participation in work tasks may be explained, in part, by differences in age and work experience; the men are younger and report fewer years of work experience than the women do. Is this difference the result of more men working in childcare in recent years or more (young) male than female workers working in childcare before furthering their education or moving on to other work? Nationwide, there has been a small but steady increase in the share of men employed in childcare, from 6.2 percent in 2004 to 8.5 percent in 2012 (Statistics Norway 2013). On the questionnaire, we asked where the

Table 1. Characteristics of male and female workers, attitudes, and work-task participation

| Variable | Women | | | Men | | | Difference in mean | Significance |
|---|----------|-------|-------|----------|-------|------|--------------------|--------------|
| | Observed | Mean | SD | Observed | Mean | SD | | |
| Assistants | 1,199 | | | 84 | | | | |
| Pre-school teachers | 1,101 | | | 49 | | | | |
| Work experience, years | 2,281 | 11.94 | 8.10 | 133 | 6.50 | 5.90 | 5.44 | *** |
| Age, years | 2,260 | 40.66 | 10.29 | 131 | 33.98 | 8.86 | 6.68 | *** |
| Attitudes toward work-task participation of men and women | | | | | | | | |
| 1 = Best suited for women, 3 = Equally suited for both, 5 = Best suited for men | | | | | | | | |
| Practical tasks with the children | 2,272 | 2.96 | 0.22 | 129 | 2.95 | 0.29 | 0.01 | |
| Physical activities with the children | 2,276 | 3.05 | 0.23 | 132 | 3.11 | 0.38 | -0.06 | *** |
| Change diapers | 2,274 | 2.97 | 0.18 | 130 | 2.97 | 0.21 | 0.00 | |
| Teach the children numbers and letters | 2,272 | 3.00 | 0.08 | 131 | 3.01 | 0.09 | 0.01 | |
| Address parents on sensitive topics | 2,267 | 2.98 | 0.20 | 129 | 2.98 | 0.12 | 0.00 | |
| Conduct parental meetings | 2,260 | 2.99 | 0.14 | 131 | 3.01 | 0.20 | -0.02 | |
| Perform work tasks | | | | | | | | |
| 1 = Never to 5 = Often | | | | | | | | |
| Practical tasks with the children | 2,236 | 3.81 | 1.05 | 130 | 3.44 | 1.04 | 0.37 | *** |
| Physical activities with the children | 2,222 | 3.84 | 0.99 | 131 | 4.26 | 0.88 | -0.42 | *** |
| Change diapers | 2,233 | 4.17 | 1.23 | 130 | 3.55 | 1.39 | 0.62 | *** |
| Teach the children numbers and letters | 2,228 | 3.81 | 1.09 | 130 | 3.56 | 1.00 | 0.25 | ** |
| Address parents on sensitive topics | 2,236 | 3.21 | 1.21 | 131 | 3.05 | 1.13 | 0.16 | |
| Conduct parental meetings | 2,227 | 3.14 | 1.74 | 129 | 2.83 | 1.71 | 0.31 | ** |

Two group mean-comparison test results.

*** $P < 0.01$, ** $P < 0.05$, * $P < 0.1$.

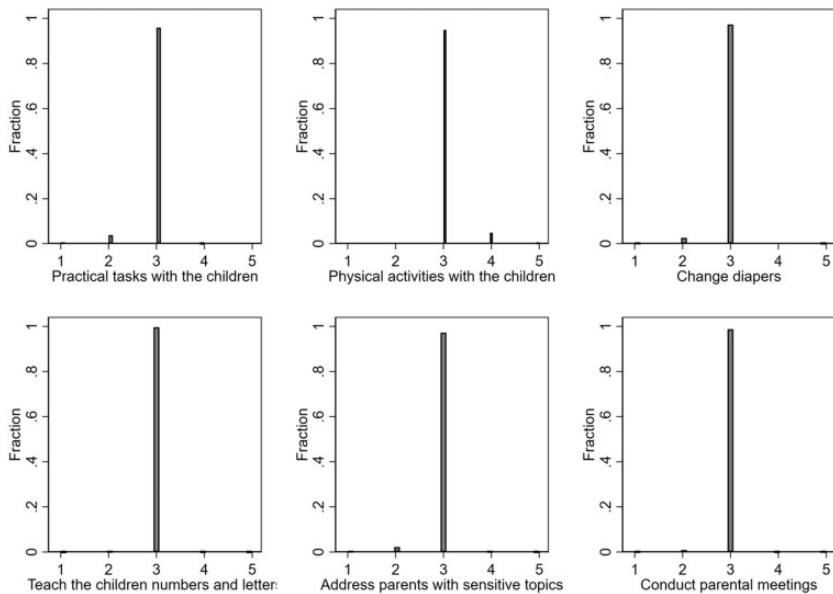


Figure 1 Attitudes toward work-task participation of men and women: 1 = Best suited for women, 3 = Equally suited for both, 5 = Best suited for men. All respondents, histogram.

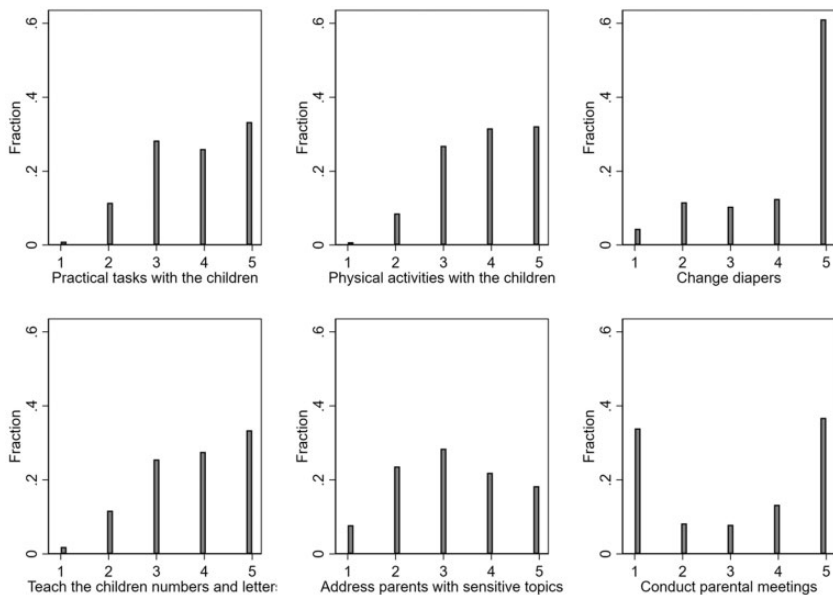


Figure 2 Perform work tasks: 1 = Never to 5 = Often. All respondents, histogram.

respondents believe they will be working in two years. The vast majority of both women and men imagined themselves still working in childcare; however, more female (86.5 percent) than male respondents (74.5 percent) answered “childcare.” The explanation for this difference is most likely a bit of both the above-mentioned possibilities: more men working in childcare, and some men are “visiting” for a short time.

Table 2 shows the results of the regressions of attitudinal responses to the participation of men and women in different work tasks on individual characteristics. The reference category in all columns is when the values of the variables *male* and *professional* are zero, indicating female assistants. The coefficients for the other variables of interest are determined in relation to this group. The variable *male* is interpreted as the difference between male assistants and female assistants, and the variable *professional* is interpreted as the difference between female professionals and female assistants.

In the first column of table 2, we regress attitudes regarding who should perform practical tasks on our variables of interest and control variables. We found no statistically significant differences between male assistants and female assistants in their attitudes toward who should perform practical tasks. Nor was there a statistically significant difference between male professionals and female professionals, as seen by the positive but insignificant interaction term. Female professionals do, however, differ significantly and positively from female assistants; female assistants express female-biased attitudes.

Column 2 shows that the small difference in group mean for participation in physical activities, as seen in table 1, is, to some extent, reproduced; more male assistants than female assistants consider men somewhat more suited to participating in physical activities. There were no differences between professionals (male or female) and female assistants.

The four remaining columns showed no significant differences between male and female professionals and nonprofessionals in their attitudes toward who should perform the following work tasks: changing diapers, teaching the children numbers and letters, addressing parents on sensitive topics, and conducting parental meetings.

As for the control variables, age significantly and positively correlates with the tasks in columns 4, 5, and 6. However, the correlation is weak, and the magnitude of the coefficient is extremely low, even for the respondents who were oldest (10 percent of the respondents are fifty-five years or older).

We detected some group differences in attitudes regarding the participation of men and women in practical tasks and physical activity, but the size of the coefficients was small. In sum, male and female professionals and nonprofessionals did not report gender-essential attitudes toward the work task participation of men and women. These strikingly egalitarian attitudes are visualized in figure 3 with the help of bar graphs and confidence intervals.

Table 3 shows that, after controlling for individual attributes (work experience and age), there were differences between men and women in their

Table 2. Dependent variable attitudes toward participation in work tasks

| Variables | (1) Practical tasks with the children | (2) Physical activities with the children | (3) Change diapers | (4) Teach the children numbers and letters | (5) Address parents on sensitive topics | (6) Conduct parental meetings |
|---|---|---|--------------------------|---|---|--|
| Male (dummy) | -0.021 (0.045) | 0.112** (0.053) | -0.010 (0.033) | 0.017 (0.015) | 0.017 (0.017) | 0.024 (0.031) |
| Professional (dummy) | 0.031*** (0.010) | 0.004 (0.010) | 0.004 (0.008) | -0.002 (0.004) | -0.003 (0.009) | -0.002 (0.006) |
| Male × professional (interaction term) | 0.031 (0.051) | -0.122* (0.070) | 0.014 (0.040) | -0.013 (0.015) | 0.015 (0.017) | -0.013 (0.031) |
| Work experience, years | 0.000 (0.001) | -0.001 (0.001) | 0.000 (0.001) | -0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.001) | 0.000 (0.000) |
| Age, years | 0.000 (0.001) | 0.000 (0.001) | 0.001 (0.001) | 0.000** (0.000) | 0.001* (0.001) | 0.001* (0.000) |
| Number employees | 0.001 (0.001) | -0.001 (0.001) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.001) | 0.000 (0.000) |
| Constant | 2.907*** (0.031) | 3.068*** (0.031) | 2.944*** (0.025) | 2.981*** (0.011) | 2.927*** (0.025) | 2.963*** (0.015) |
| Observations | 2.185 | 2.192 | 2.186 | 2.185 | 2.178 | 2.175 |
| R^2 | 0.007 | 0.008 | 0.001 | 0.004 | 0.004 | 0.004 |
| $R^{2†}$ | 0.007 | 0.002 | 0.001 | 0.002 | 0.003 | 0.003 |

Answer categories: 1 = Best suited for women, 2 = Slightly more suited for women, 3 = Equally suited for men and women, 4 = Slightly more suited for men, and 5 = Best suited for men. All respondents included.

$†R^2$ from a model excluding the male dummy term.

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $P < 0.01$, ** $P < 0.05$, * $P < 0.1$.

self-reported work task participation. Male assistants reported less frequent participation in practical tasks with the children (in the questionnaire, examples are “household work, baking, tidying, cleaning, etc.”), changing diapers, and teaching the children numbers and letters. They also reported more frequent participation in physical activities with the children and more often addressing parents on sensitive topics than the female assistants did.

Female professionals also reported participating in ways other than female assistants. The female professionals performed practical tasks or changed diapers less often than female assistants and more often taught the children letters

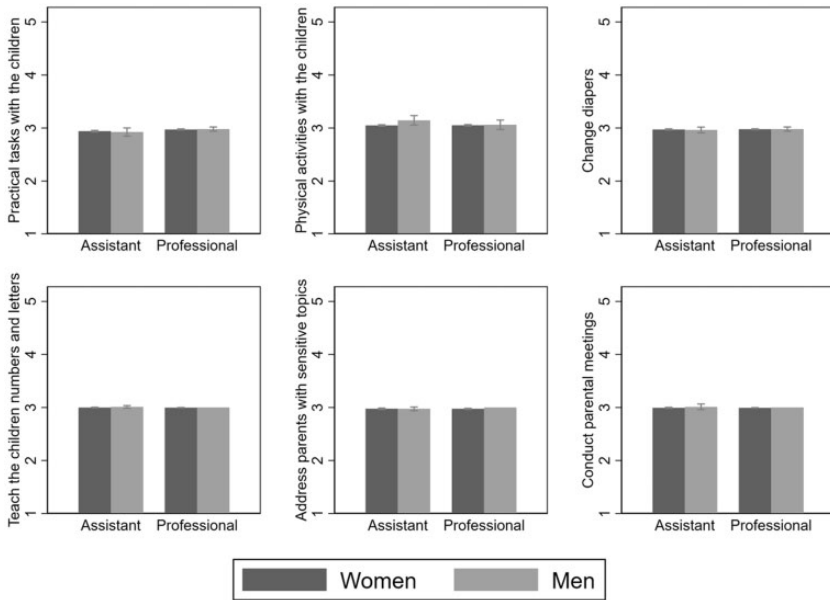


Figure 3 Attitudes toward women's and men's participation in work tasks: 1 = Best suited for women, 2 = Slightly more suited for women, 3 = Equally suited for men and women, 4 = Slightly more suited for men, 5 = Best suited for men. Male and female workers.

and numbers, addressed parents on sensitive topics, and conducted parental meetings.

There were no significant differences between male and female professionals. The low R^2 value of the first four columns indicates that neither independent variable explains the total variance of the dependent variable, meaning that, although gender was significant in the participation in these tasks, it was far from a deciding factor. To further investigate whether this is the case, we ran an analysis without the male dummy term, and while the explained variance (R^2 , bottom row in tables 2 and 3) declined somewhat, the difference was negligible. In comparison, the variance in the dependent variables of columns 5 and 6 is largely explained by the included independent variables. This is likely due to the inclusion of position instead of gender because these tasks are under the jurisdiction of professionals, as explicitly stated in the national curriculum.

Table 3 shows that the different individual characteristics of male and female workers do not account for the group mean differences in work-task participation displayed in table 1. Gender significantly correlated with the self-reported work-task participation of daycare workers. Figure 4 visualizes the results using bar graphs and confidence intervals. However, neither the size of the coefficients nor the amount of explained variance (see R^2 in the

Table 3. Dependent variable work tasks: frequency of participation

| Variables | (1) Practical tasks with the children | (2) Physical activities with the children | (3) Change diapers | (4) Teach the children numbers and letters | (5) Address parents on sensitive topics | (6) Conduct parental meetings |
|--|---|--|--------------------------|--|---|--|
| Male (dummy) | -0.346*** (0.127) | 0.562*** (0.103) | -0.637*** (0.154) | -0.203* (0.120) | 0.192* (0.114) | 0.185 (0.149) |
| Professional (dummy) | -0.197*** (0.047) | 0.061 (0.045) | -0.291*** (0.049) | 0.185*** (0.049) | 1.246*** (0.047) | 2.786*** (0.056) |
| Male × professional (interaction term) | 0.161 (0.187) | -0.264 (0.161) | 0.023 (0.287) | 0.187 (0.180) | -0.149 (0.182) | -0.094 (0.182) |
| Work experience, years | 0.015*** (0.004) | 0.007* (0.004) | 0.002 (0.004) | 0.012*** (0.004) | 0.021*** (0.004) | 0.028*** (0.004) |
| Age, years | 0.001 (0.003) | -0.005* (0.003) | -0.003 (0.004) | 0.000 (0.003) | -0.002 (0.003) | -0.001 (0.003) |
| Number of employees at workplace | -0.003 (0.003) | 0.002 (0.003) | -0.006 (0.004) | -0.001 (0.003) | 0.006* (0.003) | 0.005 (0.003) |
| Constant | 3.716*** (0.126) | 3.899*** (0.122) | 4.497*** (0.147) | 3.571*** (0.131) | 2.337*** (0.121) | 1.436*** (0.118) |
| Observations | 2,150 | 2,137 | 2,146 | 2,143 | 2,153 | 2,144 |
| R ² | 0.030 | 0.016 | 0.025 | 0.019 | 0.286 | 0.654 |
| R ^{2†} | 0.026 | 0.004 | 0.013 | 0.018 | 0.285 | 0.654 |

Analysis clustered (level of childcare center). Answer categories: 1 = Never, 5 = Often. All respondents included.

† R² from a model excluding the male dummy term.

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

***P < 0.01, **P < 0.05, *P < 0.1.

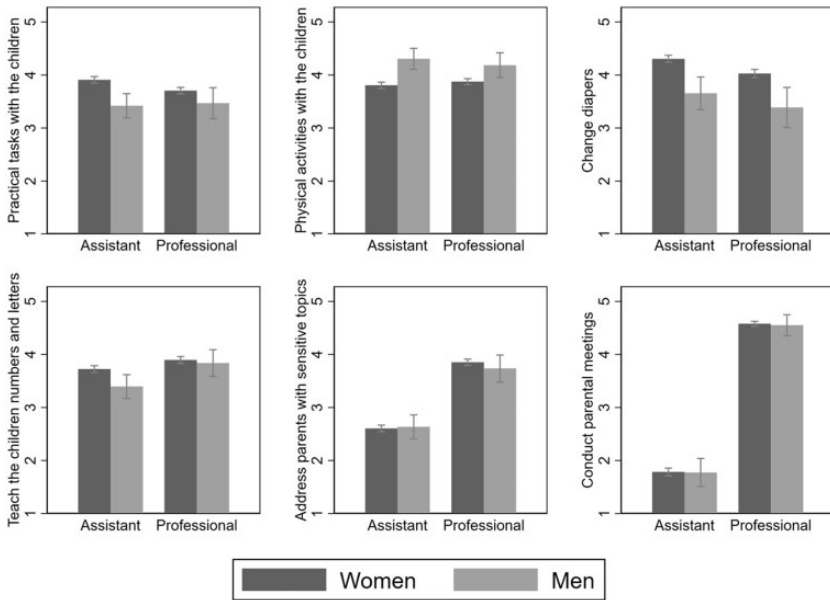


Figure 4 Work tasks, frequency of participation: 1 = Never, 5 = Often. Female and male workers.

bottom row for supporting analysis) indicates that gender is the deciding factor in work-task participation among male and female childcare workers. The latter finding is important to note to avoid inflating the impact of gender. In conclusion, gender correlates with work-task participation but is clearly not the deciding factor for such participation.

Table 4 shows the results of the regressions of attitudinal responses to the participation of men and women in different work tasks in the presence of male colleagues. The presence of male colleagues is included as a dummy variable; either the respondents have male colleagues, or they do not (in contrast to the number or share of male colleagues in the workplace). This variable is measured at the level of the daycare center (obtained from the second [manager] dataset; see respondents and procedures).

Female respondents were significantly likelier to consider both women and men suited to addressing parents on sensitive topics when their workplace also employed male workers. However, the size of the coefficient is very small (0.013, which corresponds to less than 1 percent of the constant). More notable is the lack of significant correlations for most variables; for the work tasks listed in the first five columns, there was no difference in attitudes between female workers who had male colleagues and those who did not. The nearly identical attitudes of female workers with and without male colleagues are visualized in figure 5 with the help of bar graphs and confidence intervals.

Table 4. Dependent variable attitudes toward participation in work tasks

| Variables | (1) Practical tasks with the children | (2) Physical activities with the children | (3) Change diapers | (4) Teach the children numbers and letters | (5) Address parents on sensitive topics | (6) Conduct paren- tal meetings |
|----------------------------------|---|---|--------------------------|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| Male colleagues (dummy) | 0.009 (0.011) | -0.008 (0.010) | 0.007 (0.009) | -0.002 (0.003) | 0.014 (0.009) | 0.013** (0.006) |
| Professional (dummy) | 0.031*** (0.010) | 0.003 (0.010) | 0.005 (0.008) | -0.002 (0.004) | -0.003 (0.009) | -0.002 (0.006) |
| Work experience, years | 0.001 (0.001) | -0.000 (0.001) | 0.000 (0.001) | -0.000 (0.000) | -0.000 (0.001) | 0.000 (0.000) |
| Age, years | 0.000 (0.001) | -0.000 (0.001) | 0.000 (0.001) | 0.000* (0.000) | 0.001* (0.001) | 0.001** (0.000) |
| Number of employees at workplace | 0.000 (0.001) | -0.001 (0.001) | 0.000 (0.001) | 0.000* (0.000) | 0.000 (0.001) | 0.000 (0.000) |
| Constant | 2.913*** (0.032) | 3.081*** (0.031) | 2.939*** (0.026) | 2.982*** (0.011) | 2.918*** (0.027) | 2.954*** (0.016) |
| Observations | 2,065 | 2,069 | 2,065 | 2,063 | 2,058 | 2,052 |
| R ² | 0.006 | 0.002 | 0.002 | 0.003 | 0.005 | 0.006 |

Female respondents only. Presence of male colleagues included as dummy.

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $P < 0.01$, ** $P < 0.05$, * $P < 0.1$.

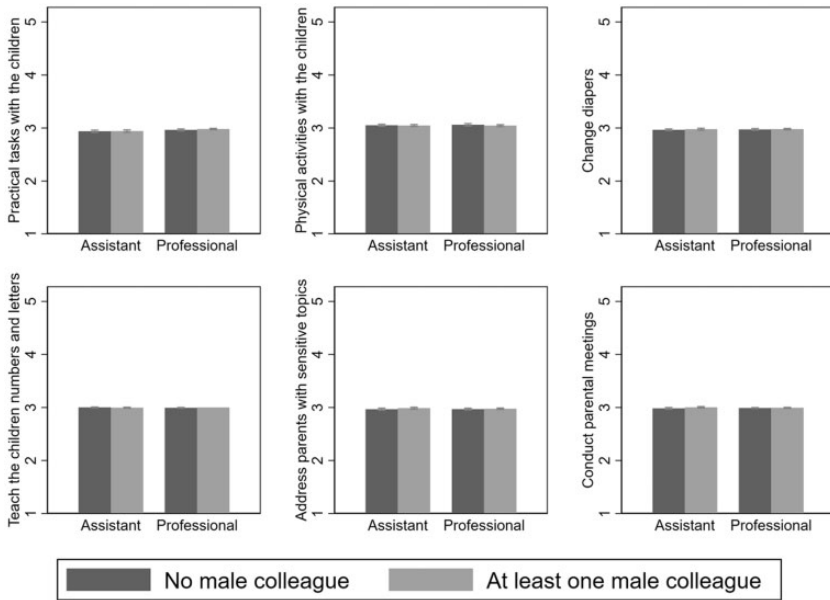


Figure 5 Attitudes toward women's and men's participation in work tasks: 1 = Best suited for women, 2 = Slightly more suited for women, 3 = Equally suited for men and women, 4 = Slightly more suited for men, 5 = Best suited for men. Female workers only.

Table 5 shows that having male colleagues was correlated with female workers' self-reported participation in three work tasks. Women reported that they taught the children numbers and letters less frequently when they worked at a daycare center with male childcare workers than when they worked at a daycare center with no male workers. Such women also more frequently addressed parents on sensitive topics or conducted parent meetings. However, these correlations do not allow any substantial interpretations, because the coefficients are very small. In comparison, being a professional shifts the respondents' answers 2.8 points on a five-point scale (table 5, column 6), while having a male colleague leads to a shift of 0.1 on the same scale. Figure 6 visualizes the similarities and differences between female workers with and without male colleagues by using bar graphs and confidence intervals. In sum, the presence of male workers did not appear to substantially affect the work task participation of female workers.

Discussion and Conclusion

The first hypothesis we proposed is that childcare workers express gender-essential beliefs by reporting that different work tasks are suitable for men and

Table 5. Work tasks, participation

| Variables | (1) Practical tasks with the children | (2) Physical activities with the children | (3) Change diapers | (4) Teach the children numbers and letters | (5) Address parents on sensitive topics | (6) Conduct paren- tal meetings |
|----------------------------------|---|---|--------------------------|--|---|---------------------------------------|
| Male colleagues (dummy) | 0.080 (0.053) | -0.025 (0.050) | 0.065 (0.064) | -0.093* (0.056) | 0.093* (0.051) | 0.107* (0.056) |
| Professional (dummy) | -0.202*** (0.048) | 0.064 (0.045) | -0.287*** (0.049) | 0.187*** (0.049) | 1.245*** (0.048) | 2.782*** (0.056) |
| Work experience, years | 0.016*** (0.004) | 0.008** (0.004) | 0.002 (0.004) | 0.012*** (0.004) | 0.022*** (0.004) | 0.028*** (0.004) |
| Age, years | 0.001 (0.003) | -0.005* (0.003) | -0.002 (0.004) | 0.000 (0.003) | -0.003 (0.003) | -0.001 (0.003) |
| Number of employees at workplace | -0.003 (0.004) | 0.002 (0.003) | -0.007* (0.004) | 0.000 (0.004) | 0.004 (0.004) | 0.003 (0.004) |
| Constant | 3.686*** (0.127) | 3.900*** (0.125) | 4.443*** (0.151) | 3.612*** (0.135) | 2.330*** (0.122) | 1.406*** (0.122) |
| Observations | 2,029 | 2,015 | 2,025 | 2,022 | 2,031 | 2,024 |
| R ² | 0.027 | 0.005 | 0.015 | 0.018 | 0.290 | 0.656 |

Presence of male colleagues at the workplace included as dummy. Female workers only.

Robust standard errors in parentheses.

*** $P < 0.01$, ** $P < 0.05$, * $P < 0.1$.

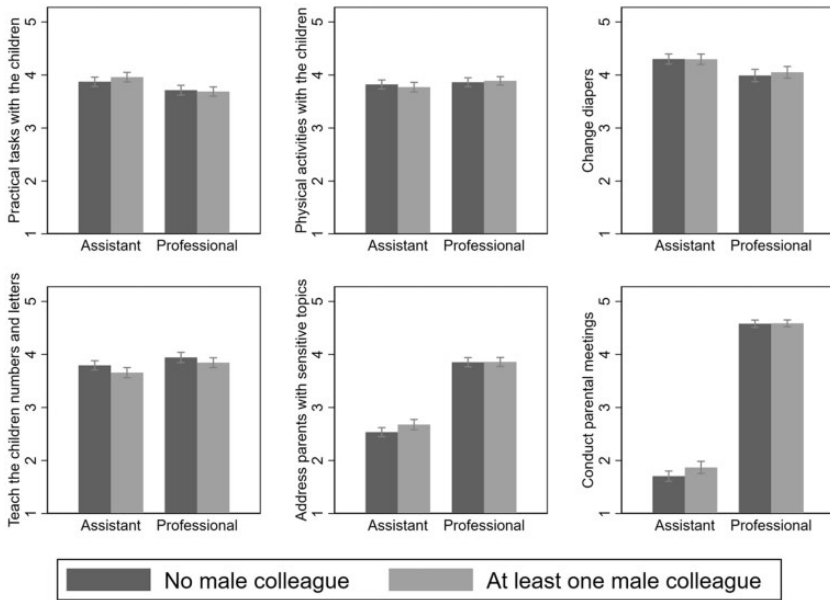


Figure 6 Work tasks: Participation. Female workers only.

women. This hypothesis is not supported by the data. The second hypothesis is that male and female workers report different frequencies of work-task participation. Some patterns do emerge: male workers report participating more often in physical activities with the children and less often in tasks that resemble traditional female household chores or involve intimate contact with children. This supports the second hypothesis. Household chores with children and participation in physical activities are tasks that have been identified by previous studies as vulnerable to gender typing. Changing diapers requires physical intimacy with children, which has also been identified as a barrier for male workers. Furthermore, the children who require diaper changes are the youngest ones, and interacting with younger children entails caring and nurturing to a larger degree than interacting with older children. This is another dimension of work in which the expectations for men are reported to differ from those for women. However, the reported differences in the frequency of participation between men and women are small, and gender does not explain much of the variation in the dependent variables. There is a measurable difference in the work-task participation of male and female workers, but gender does not appear to be a determining factor in such participation.

The third question we asked was whether there were any differences in the attitudes or work-task participation of female respondents who do and do not have male colleagues. Some significant differences emerged; however, these

were small. While some of the results regarding task segregation can be considered consistent with gender-essentialist processes playing a role, the overall picture presented in this paper is that gender-essentialist beliefs do not play a large role in structuring occupational segregation. Another point of interest is the significance of position: do attitudes and work-task participation differ for professionals and nonprofessionals? Position did not have any significant effect on attitudes, but some differences emerged regarding work tasks. Most surprisingly, given the findings from previous studies, male assistants addressed parents on sensitive topics more often than female assistants. Interpreting this result is difficult given that so few men work in daycare; those who do are most likely a select group. In conclusion, the attitudes of male and female workers toward men's and women's participation in work tasks are not gender essentialist in the sense that they consider certain work tasks to be better suited to either men or women. This analysis did find some differences in self-reported participation in some work tasks, but these were not of the magnitude suggested by previous studies. Neither the work-task participation nor the attitudes of the female respondents were affected by the presence of male colleagues. The explanation for the large share of women employed in daycare does not, at least in this analysis, appear to be found in the attitudes or the division of work tasks of Norwegian childcare workers. To further enhance our understanding of the processes at play in generating our results, we suggest that future studies employ more precise measures of work-task participation in large samples and gather data on the intermediate processes of work-task allocation.

Above all, our results suggest that the causes for the female majority in the childcare sector are not explained by the gender-essentialist attitudes or actions of these workers. These findings stand in contrast to previous studies that have argued that gender essentialism is an important explanation for the prevalence of horizontal gender segregation, even in liberal-egalitarian contexts (Charles and Bradley 2009). As Charles and Grusky (2004) argue, gender essentialism and liberal egalitarian ideas can be aligned because equality is understood as "different but equal," thus encouraging educational and occupational choices that express one's true, gendered self. Although Norway is characterized by egalitarianism, our findings question the validity of essentialism in explaining the prevalence of gender segregation in the Norwegian labor market. As others have pointed out, one explanation for this finding may be that liberal egalitarianism differs from the forms of egalitarianism that characterize Norway, and Scandinavia more broadly (Ellingsæter 2014). While liberal egalitarianism equally addresses opportunities and advocates for a "different but equal" perspective regarding gender, egalitarianism in Scandinavian countries is largely characterized by a focus on equal outcomes and advocates for a "gender as sameness" perspective (Ellingsæter 2013, 2014). This is an egalitarianism that is less consistent with gender essentialism. Recent qualitative contributions from the Norwegian context describe how

egalitarian ideas may contribute to desegregation. For instance, by interviewing Norwegian students, Myklebus (2018) illustrates how girls in male-dominated educational settings anchored their educational choices in egalitarian ideals to legitimize their nontypical gender choices. Building on the empirical insights derived from our study, we believe that a fruitful task for future research on gender segregation will be to develop theoretical perspectives that are sensitive to the ways in which gender essentialism may vary between different contexts and contribute to the production or disruption of a gender-segregated labor market.

The discrepancy between the results of our statistical analysis and the findings of previous qualitative studies supporting the role of gender essentialism opens doors for future mixed-methods research. However, although divergent methods may explain divergent results, we believe that the discrepancy may also reflect different analytical approaches. Although some previous qualitative studies have shown the relevance of essentialism in creating gender inequality in a Scandinavian context (Bloksgaard 2011; Van Laere et al. 2014), several qualitative contributions also demonstrate the ambiguity and shifting meaning of gender in gender-segregated educational institutions and occupations (Myklebust 2018; Orupabo 2018; Orupabo and Nadim 2020). Individuals may shift between narratives that position occupations and tasks in gender-neutral and gender-essentialist ways (Myklebust 2021). One important argument underpinning this literature is that the categorization and valuation of gender are highly situational and contextual (Moi, 1991; Ridgeway 2011; Ridgeway and Correll 2006). In line with these perspectives, we stress the need to develop analytical tools that enable gender scholars to examine under what conditions gender becomes relevant or irrelevant in understanding social issues (Deutsch 2007), as well as capturing the ambiguity of gender.

One important avenue for future empirical research is to explore the relationship between gender-(a)typical choices and other markers of difference, such as class and ethnicity. As recent studies have suggested, men and women are likelier to make gender-atypical choices when this leads to social mobility (Seehuus 2019). Lastly, while the actions and attitudes of individual workers undeniably contribute to the gender pattern of labor markets, employers are also important agents (Bergmann 2011; Reskin and Maroto 2011). Recent studies have shown that labor market discrimination remains a primary explanation for the overrepresentation of black workers in less-credentialed care jobs with fewer benefits (Hodges 2020). When hiring, employers seek to predict future performance, in effect performing mental gymnastics that evoke stereotypes; render statistical discrimination tempting; and are based on all the same cultural and societal norms, beliefs, and understandings that have been attributed to the workers.

Note

1. A previous version of this paper circulated in the PhD thesis of [Løvgren \(2014\)](#).

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