

Participation in formal adult education and family life – a gendered story

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Previous literature on adult education (AE) has focused on various aspects of social inequalities, and although many acknowledge the critical role of gender, the mechanisms influencing gender differences in participation are rarely to the fore. Specifically, women report family responsibilities as the main reason for not enrolling in AE. This article examines whether family responsibilities, measured as the age and number of children, act as motivators or barriers to formal AE participation differently among men and women with varying time and monetary resources, that is, partnership status and relative income, in two societies with high formal AE enrolment rates; Finland and Great Britain. The results from Finnish registers and Understanding Society for 1998–2019 demonstrate clearly that family responsibilities related to having young children in the household restrict women from participating in formal AE to a greater extent than men in both countries. Further, while Finnish society enables individuals who traditionally have fewer resources to attend formal AE, that is, single parents and larger families, in Britain, formal AE is mainly taken up by individuals without children or those in stable family situations. The results highlight the importance of institutions in providing equal access to further educational qualifications.

Introduction

In the individual adult's life course, three main factors have been extensively studied in sociological literature: education, labour market attainment, and family life. Previous research has provided substantial evidence of gender differences within their two-dimensional associations. Formal adult education (AE), which leads to a formal qualification, is essential in unravelling this multidimensionality of individual life courses. From this perspective, participation in formal AE is simultaneously an outcome of individual motivation derived from the labour market opportunities for educational qualifications, a balancing act to meet the increased time and monetary costs of family responsibilities, and a public educational institution aiming to support the livelihoods of marginalized groups such as those outside the labour market. However, evidence on how gender differences in formal AE participation are affected by incentives and barriers rising from the labour market and family life is yet missing.

This article examines whether family responsibilities act as motivators or barriers to formal AE participation differently among men and women, considering the

time and monetary resources of varying family types based on the age and number of children, the partnership status of the parents, and their relative income level. The individual-level factors that motivate formal AE participation can be realized or prevented by the contextual factors of family, education, and labour market policies. Hence, this article focuses on Great Britain and Finland, which have had similar participation rates in formal AE in the twenty-first century but different institutional settings to support participation.

Educational attainment, labour market activity, and family responsibilities are structured differently by gender, which creates varying needs and opportunities for men and women in formal AE. Despite the increases in women's education and employment in most Western societies, education is often segregated by gender as women and men attend gender-typical fields (Barone, 2011; Barro and Lee, 2013). This results in gendered occupations and unequal labour market outcomes, including lower levels of occupational attainment, entry into less stable career trajectories, and lower earnings for women over the life course (Smyth and Steinmetz, 2008; Gundert and Mayer, 2012). Furthermore, family

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formation usually follows initial education and labour market entry, and women devote more time to family responsibilities and childcare than men, taking up part-time work more often (Settersten and Mayer, 1997; Evertsson and Neramo, 2004; Massing and Gauly, 2017). While women report family responsibilities as the main reasons for not enrolling in AE, they still tend to engage in formal AE more often than men who attend work-related training (Pont, 2004; Boateng, 2009; Boeren, 2011). Considering the significant time and individual-level investment required for formal AE compared to other types of adult learning, enrolment may be more strongly structured by family-related factors such as the age and number of children, single parenthood, or household income level, all that may, in turn, create different incentives and barriers for men and women.

AE aims to promote labour market attainment and employment of low-skilled or otherwise marginalized populations (Stenberg, 2012; Vono de Vilhena *et al.*, 2016). While the time and financial constraints posed by family responsibilities can be alleviated with strong family policies such as public childcare, financial support for AE, and high labour market regulations can further realize the individual motivation for formal AE. In the European context, participation in formal AE is among the highest in the Nordic countries (Eurostat, 2021), where such policies aim at supporting families and disadvantaged groups, alleviating the obstacles of attending formal AE. However, in a liberal welfare state, such as Great Britain, the participation rates match or exceed those in Northern Europe despite households receiving less support for involvement. This is partly attributed to a less regulated labour market that promotes higher job turnover, with qualifications possessing lower signalling power and intensifying the need for upskilling (Bachmann, Bechara and Vonnahme, 2020). Consequently, this article delves into formal AE participation in Finland and Great Britain.

This article examines how family responsibilities, that is, having children, constrain enrolment in formal AE differently for men and women. Particular focus is on whether this varies based on family arrangements and time-intensive childcare needs, that is, partnership status, age and number of children, or on financial resources, that is, relative income and number of children. Further, a comparative setting is applied to analyse whether the institutional context can facilitate access to AE for those with caring responsibilities and lower financial resources. This article benefits from two longitudinal datasets: Finnish register data for Finland and Understanding Society for Great Britain and applies multilevel linear regression modelling with fixed effects over the individual life course.

The article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, we combine multiple individual factors in analysing labour market inequalities, focusing on the impacts of having children, partnership status, and income on formal AE participation. Second, we provide evidence on how these factors influence gendered roles within the household and the labour market and shape the motivation and barriers to enrolling in formal AE differently for men and women. Third, we examine the differences in two contexts, Finland and Great Britain, which consist of different educational systems, labour market regulations, and family policies but have similar rates in formal AE participation.

Theoretical background

There are competing theories regarding the role of formal AE in social inequalities (cf. Kosyakova and Bills, 2021 for a review). The cumulative advantage thesis suggests that those already in more favourable positions of education, occupations, or from advantaged backgrounds are better positioned to improve their labour market standing by investing in further educational qualifications or upskilling (Gerber and Hout, 2004; Kilpi-Jakonen, Vono de Vilhena and Blossfeld, 2015; Bukodi, 2017; Bukodi, Bourne and Betthausen, 2019). Another theory focuses on the potential for AE to mitigate social inequalities if those from more disadvantaged social groups participate more often (Stenberg, 2010; Hällsten, 2011; Blossfeld *et al.*, 2014; McMullin and Kilpi-Jakonen, 2014).

While previous literature on formal AE has focused on these aspects of social inequalities, few studies have focused explicitly on the factors influencing gender inequalities in the uptake of formal AE, although it is acknowledged as an important dimension (Leathwood and Francis 2006; Dämmrich, Vono de Vilhena and Reichart, 2014; Kilpi-Jakonen, Sirniö and Martikainen, 2014). The following review of the literature outlines how the labour market situation acts as a motivator for participation in formal AE differently for men and women. It then discusses the financial and time constraints associated with varying family types and how these factors play a motivational or constraining role differently by gender. Finally, it delves into the institutional settings that influence the division of labour in the household, encourages more disadvantaged groups to participate, and facilitates enrolment in formal AE for individuals from varying life circumstances.

Labour market motivators for formal AE participation

A substantial part of the AE literature focuses on the returns to adult learning and concludes that formal AE has a positive influence on labour market attainment,

such as earnings (Stenberg, 2010; Triventi and Barone, 2014), prestige (McMullin and Kilpi-Jakonen, 2014), and being in non-precarious employment (Vono de Vilhena *et al.*, 2016). Unfavourable labour market situations, such as unemployment, lower relative earnings, or a poor match between their education and job, can create a strong motivation for further educational qualifications (Wolbers, 2003; Hällsten, 2011). Further, disadvantaged groups, that is, low-skilled or unemployed, are found to have positive returns to individual earnings even from short re-enrolment in formal AE (Stenberg and Westerlund, 2008; Stenberg, 2010; Stenberg, 2012). However, those from more advantaged social backgrounds are also found to be more likely to attend formal AE and benefit the most from it (Kilpi-Jakonen *et al.*, 2012; Bukodi, 2017; Virdia and Schindler, 2019). This might stem from individuals with advantageous education and labour market positions being better positioned to pursue AE, often supported by their employers (Pallas, 2002; McMullin and Kilpi-Jakonen, 2014; Kosyakova and Bills, 2021).

Although labour market disadvantages or advantages are not gendered per se, various aspects of labour market disadvantages weigh heavier among women. First, although women's educational attainment has overtaken that of men in some countries, they are yet more affected by the gendered educational and occupational system due to women being less likely to recognize their occupational aspirations (Aisenbrey and Brückner, 2008; Barro and Lee, 2013). Second, women experience more unstable early careers with weak employment protection (Bukodi and Dex, 2010; Struffolino, 2019). Third, women's returns to human capital, even if obtained at similar or higher levels than men, are found to be lower than men's (Aisenbrey and Brückner, 2008). This volatility of women's labour market situations is reflected in the higher likelihood of taking up formal AE and obtaining new or further educational qualifications to improve one's situations, compared to men who more often participate in work-related training (Boeren, 2011; Knipprath and De Rick, 2014).

Due to global educational expansion, particularly the increase in higher education attainment among women, career patterns between men and women have become more alike (Bukodi and Dex, 2010; Härkönen, Manzoni and Bihagen, 2016). Despite, or due to, women facing greater disadvantage in the labour market overall and potentially facing more significant restrictions in terms of access to financial support from employers, they benefit more from attending formal AE as the upgraded educational attainment results in better employment opportunities (Kilpi-Jakonen, Vono de Vilhena and Blossfeld, 2015). This, combined with the positive finding that women attain formal AE more

often than men, indicates that women are generally more inclined to participate in formal AE both as a compensatory measure and as a means of enhancing labour market opportunities.

Family responsibilities—constraint and motivation for formal AE

Although labour market situations are important motivators for formal AE, family responsibilities are one of the biggest obstacles to AE participation (Pont, 2004; Boateng, 2009). Having children requires more resources, increasing financial and time-related constraints and demands. Family responsibilities affect mothers disproportionately more than fathers. Although men have been increasing their unpaid work at home, mothers still invest more time in childcare (Bianchi, Robinson and Milkie, 2006; Goldin, 2021). Mothers also have lower participation rates in job-related training after childbirth than fathers (Lim and dos Santos, 2024).

Childcare consumes significant amounts of time and money, particularly in contexts without public childcare. Women are more likely to alter their labour market situation by using parental and childcare leaves to devote more time to childcare (Evertsson and Nermo, 2004; Massing and Gauly, 2017). Additionally, women report family responsibilities and lack of time as the main reasons for not attending AE (Stoilova, Boeren and Ilieva-Trichkova, 2023). Single mothers without direct access to the resources of the other parent are in the most disadvantaged position. These findings highlight how family life constraints women's labour market and educational opportunities to a higher degree than men's. Specifically, mothers of young children need to invest time more intensively in personal and developmental childcare, and mothers of large families have heightened pressures for time resources due to an increase in both passive supervision and development-rich activities (Monna and Gauthier, 2008). Hence, we expect that

H1: Parents with greater time constraints because of family responsibilities, that is, single parents and parents of large families or young children, have a lower likelihood of formal AE enrolment, particularly among mothers.

Granting that time investments can constrain parents from participating in AE, family responsibilities also create pressure on parents' financial resources. On the one hand, raising children increases costs of living in general, and with multiple children in the household in particular, affecting not only the direct costs of living (food, clothes, housing) but also expenditure on services such as childcare, education, and hobbies. On the other hand, the persistent motherhood penalty in

career progression and mothers' higher likelihood to alter their labour market position and take up part-time work due to family responsibilities may result in lower labour market rewards than desired (Evertsson and Neramo, 2004; Aisenbrey, Evertsson and Grunow, 2009; Härkönen, Manzoni and Bihagen, 2016; Aisenbrey and Fasang, 2017). In particularly disadvantageous positions are single parents, who do not have the balancing system of two-earner families and bear the increased costs and possible motherhood penalties alone. If the family's labour market returns are insufficient in covering the increased costs of family life it may create incentives for changing one's job or participating in formal AE. Due to gender inequalities in the labour market, on the one hand, families may consider getting better returns for fathers through increased investment in their formal AE, or on the other hand, they may consider it less risky to use men's higher income to sustain family life while the mother is in AE. Despite the possible increase in motivation for higher labour market returns to sustain family life, generally, we expect that:

H2: Parents with greater financial constraints, that is, those with lower income or with many children, are less likely to participate in formal AE.

Institutions enabling participation in formal AE

Institutions can support the uptake of adult learning by creating opportunities to realize the individual motivation that arises from an increased need for better labour market returns and removing family responsibility barriers to participation in AE. The different institutional settings of formal AE can be partially explained by the contrasts between the British market-oriented system and Finland's highly regulated and employment-protected labour market. In Great Britain, lower labour market regulation leads to higher job turnover. This, combined with the low vocational specificity of the British education system, increases the demand for employer-sponsored on-the-job training, and individuals outside the labour market invest more often in formal qualifications (Bachmann, Bechara and Vonnahme, 2020). In Finland, active labour market policies encourage individuals outside the labour market to enrol in formal AE since much of this training aims to attain vocational qualifications (Duell, Grubb and Singh, 2009). Overall, individuals rely less on their employers for sponsorship, yet employers are a major provider of job-related training (Kilpi-Jakonen, Sirniö and Martikainen, 2014).

AE in Finland and Great Britain share some similarities how formal AE provision is organized. In both countries, individuals can attend any educational level in formal AE, from compulsory school certificates to

professional degrees and apprenticeships to academic qualifications if meeting the entry criteria, resulting in low educational tracking (Reichelt, Collischon and Eberl, 2019). Also, the format of studying can be more versatile and flexible for formal AE students than traditional degree students to accommodate the myriad of family and work needs of adult participants. As a result, the participation rates in formal AE are among the highest in Europe (Eurostat, 2021). While men participate slightly less in formal AE than women, their participation rates in Finland are still 1.5 times that of the European average and double in the UK, and women's participation exceeds even further (see Figure 1).

Despite the similarities, the main differences in the AE systems are related to financial support. In Finland, support is generous and has few restrictions. Formal AE programmes do not have high fees or costs, and individuals are eligible for an income-based AE benefit if they enrol in a formal full-time AE program, or they can receive regular student benefits if they aim to upgrade their qualifications. Additionally, employers are required to permit study leave for full-time studies if the employee has been employed for at least a year. In Great Britain, formal AE is more costly as it often includes tuition and fees, and public support is more targeted, with employers playing a significant role in sponsoring AE. Individuals can apply for grants or financial support. However, due to limited public student finance, it is complemented with grants from public and private organizations with varying eligibility criteria, making the system complex to navigate. Without an extensive AE support system, enrolment in Great Britain can be expected to be more dependent on, and hence restricted by, individual resources than in Finland, where public institutions mitigate these.

Family policies that can alleviate the time and financial pressures of family responsibilities may facilitate equal opportunities for formal AE participation. In Finland, the universal right to childcare guarantees subsidized public childcare for each child until they start compulsory education at age six. However, parents may also stay home, full or part-time, until the child is three years old with financial assistance. In Great Britain, the availability of formal, affordable childcare for young children is meagre. Families are eligible for part-time public Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) from age 3 onwards, expanded to disadvantaged 2-year-olds in 2013, leaving parents responsible for organizing childcare before that with private, informal, or family-based childcare arrangements. Some parents are eligible to apply for childcare support when participating in full-time formal AE that results in a qualification. Due to the contrasting availability of public childcare between the countries, we

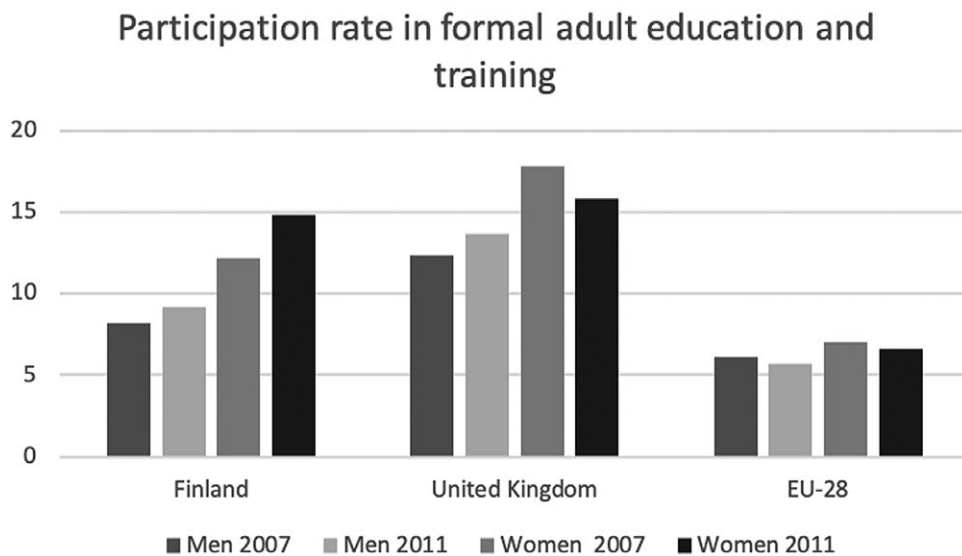


Figure 1 Participation rate in formal adult education, 2007 and 2011 (Eurostat, 2021: most recent data)

assume that the time constraints of family responsibilities are higher, and hence participation in formal AE is less likely, among households with restricted time resources in Great Britain than in Finland.

Other family policies outside childcare can alleviate the increased financial costs of child-rearing. In Finland, every child is eligible for child benefit until the age of 17 and families have various services available to support the socio-economic health and well-being of the family. In Great Britain, support for families is heavily based on the tax system, which relies on employment and earnings of the family, although some family policies are targeted to alleviate poverty and other social problems (Daly, 2010). In other words, the British system supports single parents through social assistance based on (lower) income levels, whereas support in Finland comes from family benefits based on single-parent status (OECD, 2022). Hence, both countries aim to alleviate the financial constraints single parents face. However, comparing the stronger emphasis on family well-being also outside the reduction of financial constraints of single parents in Finnish social policies to a system with a focus on poverty alleviation among single parents in Great Britain, we expect that Finnish single mothers face more opportunities to enhance labour market standing through formal AE. To conclude, we hypothesize that:

H3: Strong support for families alleviates resource constraints to participation in formal AE, resulting in a smaller gap in the likelihood of enrolling between family types and gender in Finland than in Great Britain

Data and methods

Datasets

This study benefits from two longitudinal datasets that provide detailed information on individual and household factors: Finnish register data and the Understanding Society (University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research, 2022). Although the type of data differs between the two micro-level datasets and results in very different sizes of analytical samples, it should not affect the comparability of results, as we do not test whether the effects of individual-level factors on the outcome statistically differ across the two countries, but are interested in the overall phenomenon whether and how the family and labour market factors influence the probability of enrolment.

The Finnish registers cover the total Finnish population since 1987; thus, we analyse the birth cohorts 1965–1985. Because the polytechnics (universities of applied sciences) were established in 1996 and the AE system experienced a comprehensive reform in 1997 in Finland, the observation period starts from 1998 until 2019 (latest available data for all variables). The sample consists of over 1,5 million individuals (784,822 men and 736,581 women) and over 22 million person-years.

The United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) comprises data from the harmonized Understanding Society bi-annual survey and the original sample members of the former British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) from 1991 to 2009. For comparability and data limitations, we use the survey

waves 8–18 (1998) of the BHPS and waves 2–10 of Understanding Society (2018–2020) covering the birth cohorts 1964–1984. As a result, the sample includes almost 4,000 individuals (1,848 men and 1,948 women) and over 36,500 person-years.

Variables

The outcome variable is enrolling in formal AE. As neither dataset directly collects information specifically on AE, information on all educational enrolment and attainment is used to calculate age-appropriate educational enrolment. This is calculated based on the optimal time of obtaining a particular degree (i.e. 3 years for a bachelor's degree) and the age of enrolment if no gaps in educational trajectory would have occurred. This allows us to calculate enrolment in formal education, which is considered the initial educational attainment and not AE, allowing a few years of flexibility in obtaining the degree to count in possible gap years. Therefore, to observe enrolment in formal AE, the observation period begins when the individual is not in initial education anymore. For Finland, enrolment information is derived from graduation and registration years of educational qualifications. Registration year is available only for the highest degree obtained (not the most recent), in this case, the expected/average time of completing the degree in question was calculated to observe the most likely starting year. Further, information on student benefits and student activity status is used to derive information on educational enrolment. In Great Britain, the enrolment has been observed with information on formal education enrolment, including any full-time education which began in the previous year that has not ended by the time of the interview and any part-time training in an appropriate institution (waves 8–18), on new qualifications obtained and self-defined student status. The outcome variable was measured at time $t + 1$ to observe the independent variables at the time of the enrolment decision rather than the actual enrolment (which would then affect, for example, labour market status and income of the year of enrolment).

The main independent variables consider the individual's family situation, particularly measuring the factors related to children in the household. We use the age of the youngest child (0 = no children, 1 = 0–3 years old, 2 = 4+ years old) and the number of children in the household to derive the possible impacts of family life on AE. To examine the most disadvantageous family situations, we analyse the interaction effects of this variable with partnership status (married, cohabiting, single) and relative income (deciles of individual gross monthly earnings, inflation-adjusted). To analyse the gender differences in these associations, the sample is split by gender and results are presented separately

for men and women. However, due to the deficient number of single fathers in the Great Britain data, the interaction results for single men with children in the household are not shown.

Control variables include initial educational attainment (categories based on the national educational system), labour market activity (employed, unemployed, outside the labour force), age, age squared, and country (only for the GB sample). Detailed information and descriptive statistics of all variables are provided in [Table A1](#) for both countries.

Analytical strategy

Multilevel linear regression models analyse how factors related to family, that is, age and the number of children and partnership status, and labour market, that is, relative income, influence the probability to enrol in formal AE, considering various other labour market and demographic factors over individual life courses. Clustered standard errors acknowledge the repeated observations of individuals across time, allowing intra-group correlation. Moreover, other unobserved factors, such as region or school district, might influence how family factors shape decision-making of AE, but also, more directly, the possibilities of AE enrolment (e.g. the distance to AE facilities). For these reasons, we apply fixed effects to counter the unobserved heterogeneity within the individual observation period, providing more robust results on the time-varying factors.

To examine whether family responsibilities create time and financial constraints that influence the enrolment in formal AE, we first present the unadjusted probabilities of formal AE participation between men and women ([Figure 2](#)) and the adjusted impacts of the main independent variables, i.e. the age and number of children in the household with partnership status and income ([Tables 1–2](#)). Then we examine interaction effects between different family and labour market factors, presented as graphs of predictive margins for clearer interpretation ([Figures 3–8](#)). In the first part, we test whether specific family groups, including households without children, are more time-constrained to enrol in formal AE (H1), analysing an interaction between the age of the youngest child and partnership status testing whether having small children create particular time constraints ([Figures 3](#) for Finland and [Figures 4](#) for Great Britain), and an interaction between the number of children and partnership status, particularly being interested in single parents and large families ([Figures 5](#) for Finland and [Figures 6](#) for Great Britain). Unfortunately, we are unable to show the results for single men in GB due to the very low number of single fathers. In addition to the control variables mentioned above, these models control for individual income. In the second part, we test whether the financial constraints of family responsibilities impact

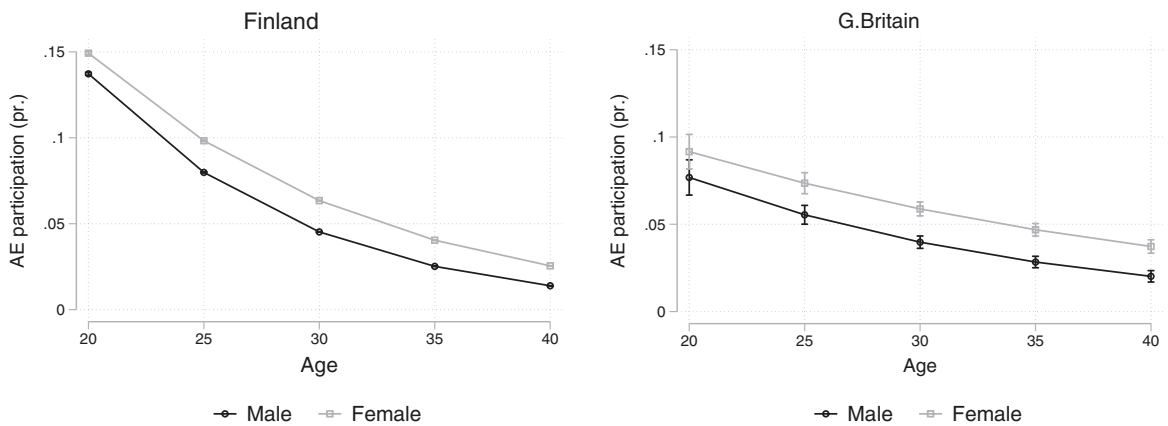


Figure 2 Gender differences in formal adult education participation

enrolment in formal AE (H2) by analysing an interaction between relative income deciles and the number of children on formal AE (Figures 7 for Finland and Figures 8 for Great Britain). Models control for partnership status and other individual covariates listed above. As the number of children is a continuous variable, the values 0, 1, and 3 have been chosen for the graphs to represent those without children, one-child households, and larger families. Results are presented separately for Finland and Great Britain to examine the role of institutional context in providing opportunities for participation in formal AE (H3).

Results: impact of family responsibilities between men and women

To get a picture of the overall gender differences in formal AE participation, Figures 2 demonstrates the probability of enrolling in formal AE between men and women over an individual's age using a simple logistic regression model with SEs clustered by individuals (without control variables). In both countries, women are more likely to attend formal AE than men; however, the difference is small. Although the likelihood of enrolling in formal AE reduces over one's age, the gender difference does not seem to diminish at later ages. Despite the overall gender differences being relatively small, they do not yet tell whether there are further gendered mechanisms at play behind these aggregate estimates.

To examine the relationship between family life and enrolment in formal AE, Table 1 (Finland) and Table 2 (Great Britain) report the overall impacts of the main independent variables, that is, family life and labour market factors; Model 1 shows the impact of the number of children in the household on enrolment in formal AE, and Model 2 the impact of the age of the youngest child in the household, both including partnership status and income.

The results for Finland (Table 1) show that family life does impact the enrolment in formal AE and similar directions for both men and women. The number of children is positively associated with enrolment, that is, the more children one has, the more likely one is to enrol in formal AE in Finland (Model 1). Similarly, men and women with older children in the household have a higher probability of enrolment than those without children (Model 2). On the contrary, having young children in the household reduces the chances of enrolling in formal AE to a higher degree among women than men in Finland. Further, single parents have the highest probability of participating in formal AE compared to any other partnership status group among both men and women. These overall results do not draw a solid gendered picture for the impacts of family life on formal AE enrolment in Finland, the main gender difference being the strong negative influence of having toddlers in the household found mainly among mothers.

The results for Great Britain (Table 2) draw a somewhat more varying picture of the impacts of family life on formal AE enrolment between men and women. First, the impacts of family life and children are found to be the opposite to those found in Finland; the impact of having a child, whether looked at by number of children (Model 1) or the age of the youngest child (Model 2), is small but negative, reducing the probability of enrolling in formal AE. An apparent result is the negative effect of having small children in the household, compared to households without children, and this is notably visible among women. Considering the lower statistical power of the GB sample, the fact that this result is statistically significant tells that it is an important factor for formal AE participation, particularly affecting mothers of young children. Second, all impacts of having children (number or age) are much weaker among men, indicating lower restrictions on enrolment due to family life for men in Great Britain.

Table 1 Impacts of family and labour market factors on enrolment in formal AE, multilevel linear regression models with fixed effects and clustered standard errors, Finland

	Men		Women	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Number of children in the hh	0.002*** (0.000)		0.005*** (0.000)	
Age of the youngest child (ref: no children)				
0–3 years		–0.000*** (0.000)		–0.008*** (0.000)
4–16 years		0.006*** (0.000)		0.007*** (0.000)
Partnership status (ref: Single)				
Cohabiting	–0.002*** (0.000)	–0.001*** (0.000)	–0.010*** (0.000)	–0.008*** (0.000)
Married	–0.002*** (0.000)	–0.001*** (0.000)	–0.011*** (0.000)	–0.006*** (0.000)
Income (log)	–0.009*** (0.000)	–0.009*** (0.000)	–0.007*** (0.000)	–0.009*** (0.000)
Constant	0.492*** (0.002)	0.448*** (0.002)	0.513*** (0.003)	0.502*** (0.003)
N (person-years)	11,591,579	11,591,579	10,284,847	10,284,847

Note: All models control for employment status, initial educational attainment, age, and age squared.

Table 2 Impacts of family and labour market factors on enrolment in formal AE, multilevel linear regression models with fixed effects and clustered standard errors, Great Britain

	Men		Women	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Number of children in the hh	–0.000 (0.003)		–0.006* (0.003)	
Age of the youngest child (ref: no children)				
0–3 years		–0.002 (0.006)		–0.033*** (0.007)
4–16 years		–0.003 (0.006)		–0.016* (0.006)
Partnership status (ref: Single)				
Cohabiting	–0.006 (0.007)	–0.005 (0.007)	–0.014* (0.007)	–0.014* (0.007)
Married	–0.012 (0.007)	–0.011 (0.007)	–0.019* (0.007)	–0.013 (0.008)
Income (log)	–0.001 (0.002)	–0.001 (0.002)	–0.003 (0.002)	–0.004 (0.002)
Constant	0.167*** (0.025)	0.166*** (0.025)	0.154*** (0.024)	0.159*** (0.024)
N (person-years)	17,070	17,070	19,456	19,456

Note: All models control for employment status, initial educational attainment, age, age squared, and country.

Time constraints on enrolment (H1)

Figures 3–6 present results on models analysing whether family responsibilities create time constraints that have varying impacts on the enrolment probability across different family groups and gender (H1). Considering that having young children in the household could require more intense time resources and single parents carrying a heavier burden of these, Figures 3 (Finland) and Figures 4 (Great Britain) present the interaction between the age of the youngest child and partnership status. In Finland, the differences are small, and partnership status does not seem to be a vital factor in determining how having children influences AE enrolment.

Particularly among men, the differences are minuscule. Among women, there is a toddler disadvantage among partnered (cohabiting and married) mothers with small children in the household as they have the lowest likelihood to enrol in formal AE compared to any other group. This contrasts married mothers with older children as their likelihood is slightly higher than others. In Great Britain, women without children in the household have the highest likelihood to enrol, independent of their partnership status. Although women with children of any age are less likely to enrol, some evidence suggests that having a toddler (0–3 years old) is disadvantageous for enrolment in formal AE compared to

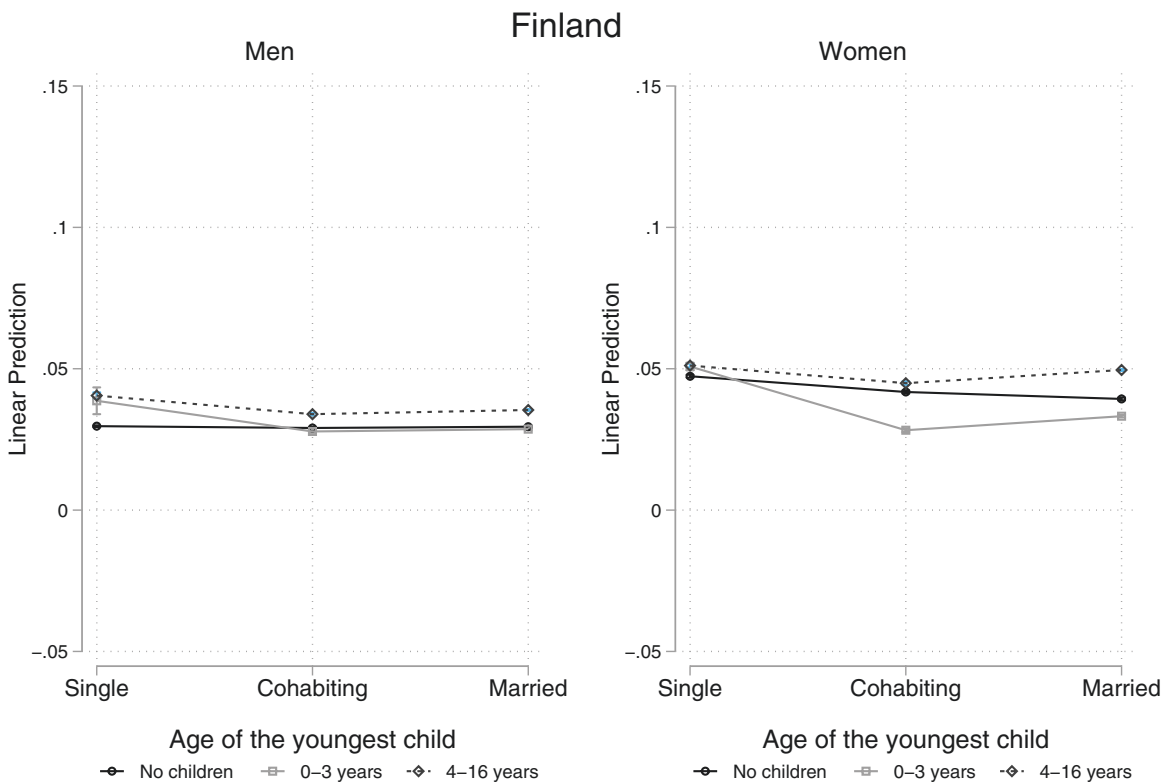


Figure 3 The impact of age of the youngest child by partnership status on formal AE enrolment, Finland

those without children. There is some indication that single men without children (predicted probability (PP) 0.042, CI (0.034, 0.052) and fathers with older children are more likely to enrol in AE than married fathers, but the differences are small.

To analyse whether time constraints apply more among large families, **Figures 5** (Finland) and **Figures 6** (Great Britain) demonstrate the interaction results on the number of children in the household and partnership status. These results show a somewhat different picture between the two countries. In Great Britain, the results are similar to the ones related to the age of the youngest child; women in disadvantageous family situations, that is, with many children and less stable partnerships (single or cohabiting), have lower likelihood to enrol in formal AE. There are few differences among fathers who are married, cohabiting, or for men without children (PP for single men without children is 0.042, CI (0.030, 0.051), slightly higher than among those in partnerships). The results for single fathers with children in the household in GB are not shown due to the very low number of cases. In Finland, the results for large families differ slightly from the ones for toddlers; enrolment in formal AE is higher among the family population, both men and women and those with multiple children in the household have the

highest likelihood to enrol, and those without children have the lowest. The differences between partnership status are minor, particularly among men, but there is an indication that married and single mothers with many children are slightly more likely to enrol. One surprising result is that in Finland the highest likelihood to enrol in AE is found among the most disadvantaged individuals—single mothers and fathers with multiple children in the household compared to other family groups.

Financial constraints on enrolment (H2)

To examine whether family responsibilities create financial constraints to formal AE participation (H2), **Figures 7** (Finland) and **Figures 8** (Great Britain) demonstrate the predicted probabilities to enrol in formal AE by income deciles and the number of children in the household. The income differences seem similar between the two countries; people with lower income levels are more likely to enrol. Although the income differences are also visible among men, they are weaker than among women in Finland, whereas, in Great Britain, income seems irrelevant to the likelihood of enrolment in formal AE among men. Interestingly, the impact of having children on formal AE enrolment differs between men and women in the two countries. The

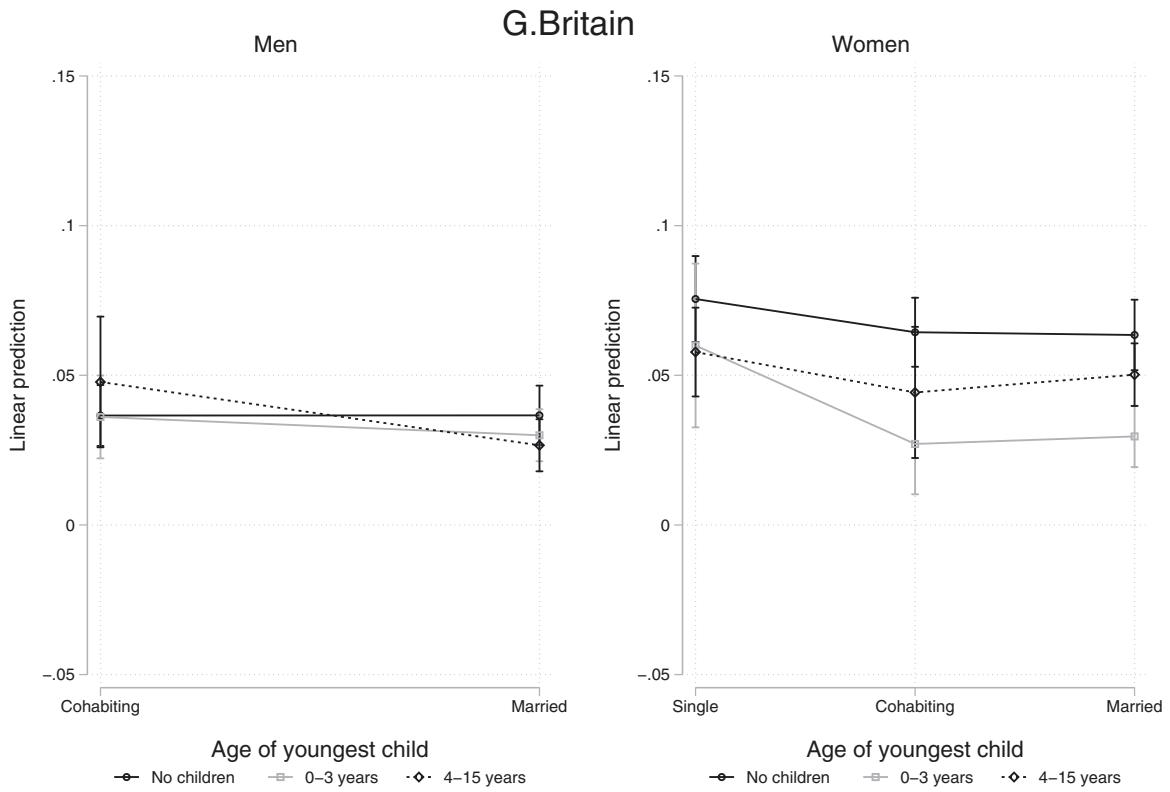


Figure 4 The impact of age of the youngest child by partnership status on formal AE enrolment, Great Britain

gap between those with and without children in the household is almost non-existent among men in both countries, but it is evident among women. In Finland, the enrolment gap between women with and without children diminishes towards higher income levels, persisting towards women with multiple children having a higher likelihood to enrol. In Great Britain, the difference between women with and without children is negative: those with children are less likely to enrol in formal AE, particularly if they have many children in the household, and the difference increases towards higher income levels.

Discussion and conclusions

This article studies how family responsibilities are related to gender differences in participation in formal AE in Finland and Great Britain. The main components that often form the need and motivation for further educational qualifications arise from initial educational attainment, labour market situation, and family responsibilities. Notably, we argue that these factors provide gendered motivations and opportunities for formal AE participation due to resource constraints being weighed unequally between women and

men in various family and labour market situations. Therefore, this article provides empirical evidence on the gendered relationships between family responsibilities and formal AE participation and how these vary between different institutional contexts; Finland and Great Britain.

Despite the higher volume of women attaining formal AE in both countries, the results demonstrate that the impact of having children is more depriving for women than men. Regression results indicate that there are significant gender differences in how family responsibilities and labour market attainment influence enrolment in formal AE: while men are less affected by these factors, women seem to be more constrained in the take up of further educational qualifications if there are (small) children in the household. While this result holds in both countries, the gendered limitations for formal AE are more apparent in the British context than in the Finnish, indicating insufficient institutional support in mitigating the constraints of gendered family responsibilities.

We find that time-related constraints from rearing children are associated with formal AE enrolment in both countries, supporting our first hypothesis (H1). The results show that mothers with young children

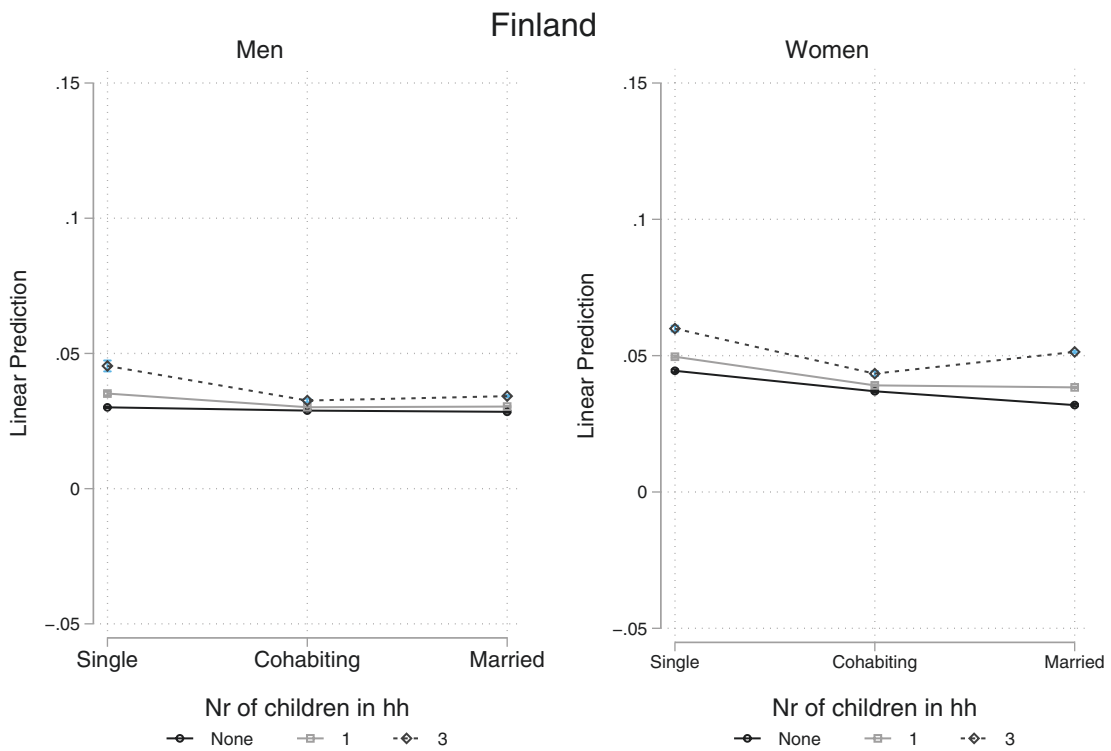


Figure 5 The impact of the number of children by partnership status on formal AE enrolment, Finland

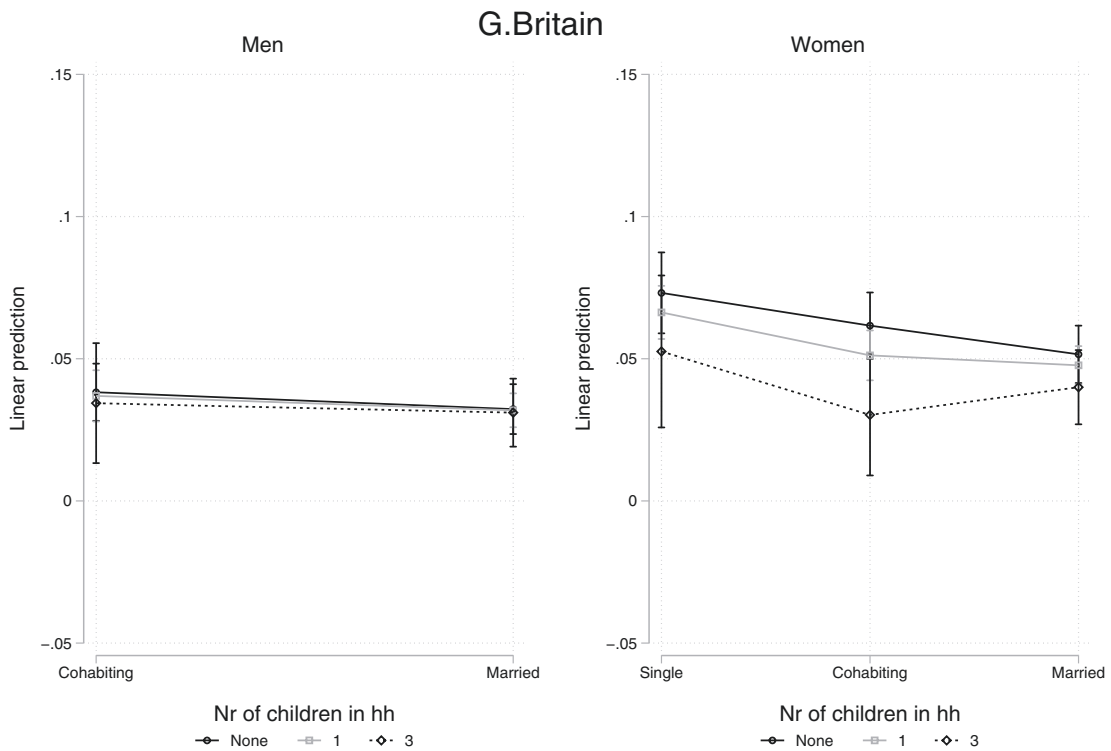


Figure 6 The impact of the number of children by partnership status on formal AE enrolment, Great Britain

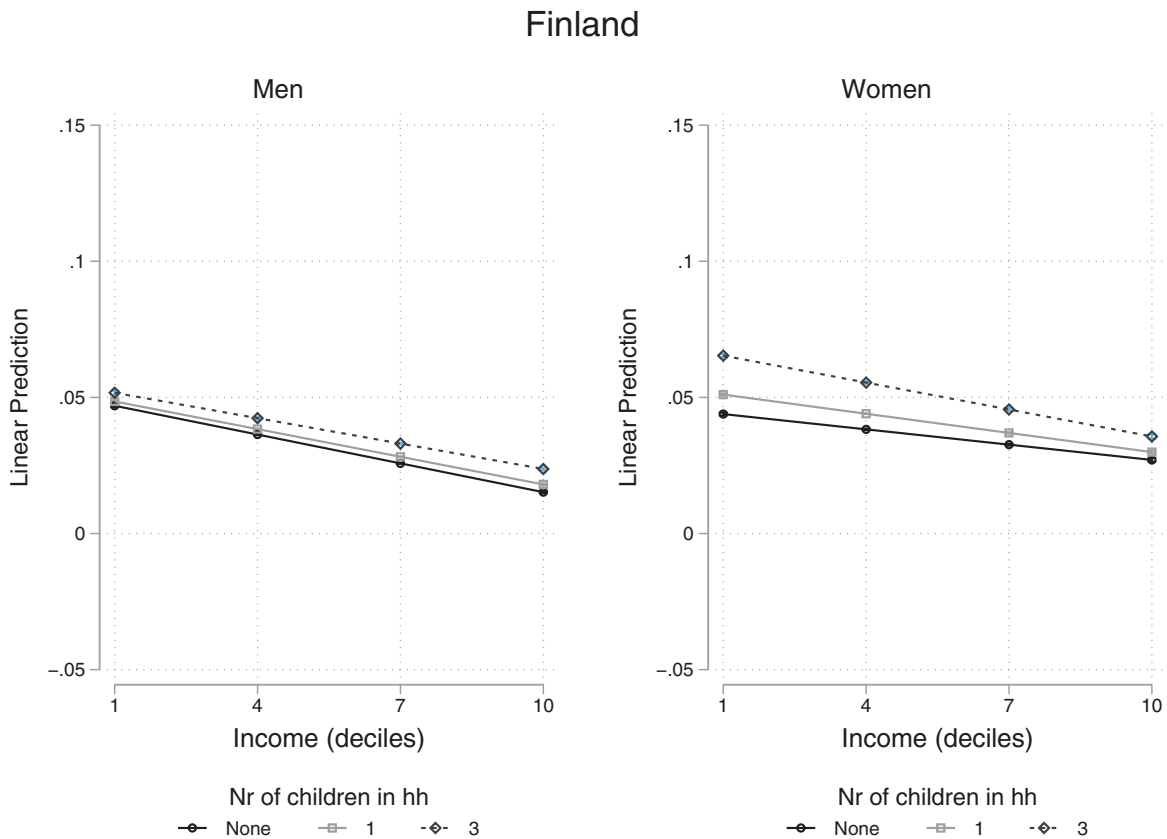


Figure 7 Income differences based on the number of children on enrolment in formal AE, Finland

in the household are less likely to enrol in formal AE. Surprisingly, this constraint is most evident among partnered mothers, who could share family responsibilities with the other partner. The greater availability of public childcare in Finland seems not to mitigate this, which can reflect the possibility for parents (usually mothers) to take up childcare leave during the first 3 years of the child's life, impeding the enrolment in education or the return to the labour market, when there is another earner in the family. While this finding holds in Great Britain when examining the number of children, that is, larger families being more constrained from enrolling, it does not seem to apply among big families in Finland. On the contrary, single parents with multiple children are slightly more likely to enrol in formal AE compared to other family groups. Therefore, our hypothesis that institutional support alleviates constraints is only partially supported, applying among large families but not mothers with small children. Considering this does not seem to be related to childcare availability, it could indicate that the financial pressure to improve parents' labour market situation for larger families overtakes the barriers on the one hand, while financial support for AE

makes it financially less burdensome to participate on the other.

Although the results on single mothers and big families indicate strong gendered family responsibilities that prevent obtaining further educational qualifications in Great Britain, low-income mothers are found to have a higher probability to enrol in formal AE than high-income women. This rejects our second hypothesis on financial constraints (H2). Low income may be more of a motivator than a barrier to obtaining further educational qualifications, independent of the initial educational attainment or occupation. This aligns with previous research emphasizing that formal AE creates opportunities for better labour market attainment for those in poor employment situations (Stenberg and Westerlund, 2008; McMullin and Kilpi-Jakonen, 2014). This likelihood was slightly lower among mothers of big families in Great Britain, but family responsibilities seem to constrain high-income women more. This suggests that resource-constrained families may receive more public support to balance out insufficient resources or are more in need of improved labour market standing, resulting in higher enrolment probability. In Finland, similarly, low-income mothers with multiple

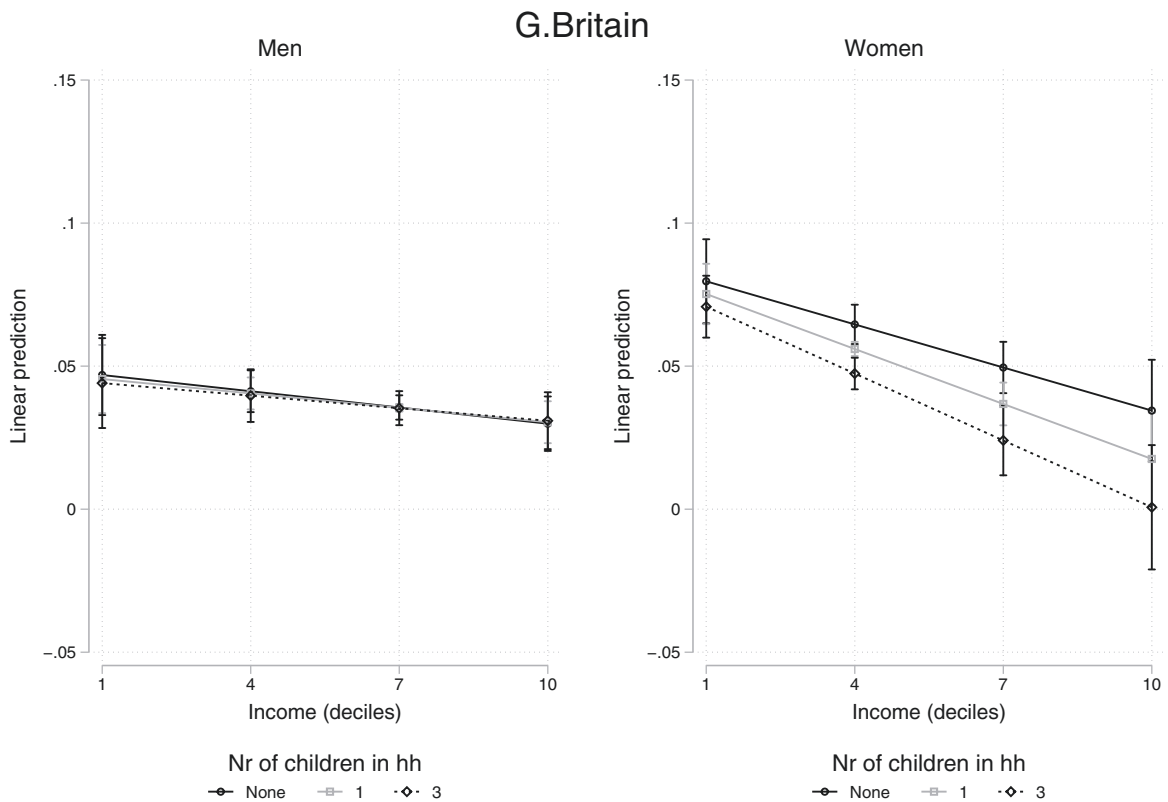


Figure 8 Income differences based on the number of children on enrolment in formal AE, Great Britain

children had a heightened likelihood of enrolment, indicating a positive impact of strong public financial support for AE and families, enabling the realization of the motivation to improve one's economic situation through education. Overall, the financial pressures of family responsibilities are not found to constrain formal AE enrolment in either institutional context (H3), either suggesting strong financial support in both or a weaker role of institutions in general.

The results for both countries show that partnership status is significant in defining opportunities for formal AE participation. However, contrary to our expectations, mothers in more stable partnerships are less likely to enrol than single mothers or women without children. This, in line with other results, is a very gendered finding, applying only among women, while family responsibilities impact men less, whether it is measured based on children or partnership. These results could indicate that relationship stability reduces the motivations for further educational qualifications among mothers or that married mothers face more conservative roles in family responsibility take up. While single mothers can not share the burden of responsibility, they are also solely responsible for the family's livelihood and, hence, more incentivized to take up AE if provided an opportunity.

The impact of family responsibilities seems to share similarities between the two countries, although some differences are also found (H3). Both countries are found to create financial situations where low-income individuals can take up further educational qualifications to improve their labour market attainment. However, the role of family responsibilities varies. Despite the high level of labour market protection and universal family support policies in Finland, women with small children are still disadvantaged in attending formal AE. However, single parents or large families have higher chances to enrol, suggesting that the Finnish welfare state reduces barriers, particularly among resource-constrained families. In Great Britain, on the other hand, formal AE opportunities are strongly gendered, assumingly due to the unequal distribution of family responsibilities, lack of childcare support, and mothers' employment adaptations (Pont, 2004; Boateng, 2009; Kosyokova and Bills, 2021). Overall, this suggests a gendered Matthew effect of family responsibilities on AE in Great Britain, as men have better chances to update and upgrade their skills and qualifications in the market-oriented labour market (Bukodi, 2017; Kosyokova and Bills, 2021). More robust family policies and a more open AE system could alleviate the

negative impact of individual resource constraints among women and provide equal AE opportunities in Great Britain.

While our results align with what is known about the gendered life course, some data-related issues may affect the results. Our analyses rely on two types of data: a high-quality longitudinal panel survey and register data. While the survey asks individuals more directly about educational enrolment and the type of education, register data lacks such benefit. However, the enrollment information at the time of the survey does not provide a complete picture of AE participation; hence, information on student status, registration, and graduation years are used for both datasets. Therefore, although the typology of sources is different, the dependent variables measure very similar factors. Another issue may arise from different sample sizes, which may create differences in the statistical significance of findings, and comparing such between the datasets needs to be interpreted cautiously. However, these data issues may also work for our benefit. Considering that both datasets provide similar results regarding the gendered aspects of AE, despite different details of measurements and statistical power, it enriches the robustness of the findings on the overall phenomenon.

Given our results and previous studies, future research should focus on how AE systems operate and provide equal opportunities in various country contexts. This article finds two possible types of systems of formal AE; the results for Finland suggest a system that promotes opportunities for individuals in vulnerable or disadvantaged life situations, and AE is used as a booster of well-being across family types, whereas the results for Great Britain suggest that formal AE system emphasizes the updating of skills for those in better-off situations with family constraints preventing participation. Considering these systems are almost equal in the formal AE enrolment rates, the results emphasize the differences behind the aggregate

picture. Hence, further research should look in detail at whether there are other types of formal AE systems, particularly in contexts where overall enrolment is high and in light of gendered labour markets, varying family responsibilities or gendered societal expectations, and if the aims of these systems are met concerning who enrolls or whether the system fails in its aims to provide equal chances for improved labour market returns.

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Data availability

The data underlying this article is available in the UK Data Service at <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-19> for Great Britain. The data for Finland is provided by Statistics Finland under license (no TK-53-507-12).

Table A1 Descriptive statistics of the variables

Variable	Finland (FIN)		Great Britain (GB)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Enrol in formal adult education	0.03 (0.2)	0.03 (0.2)	0.04 (0.2)	0.05 (0.2)
Age of the youngest child in the hh				
No children	55.0	39.3	57.0	43.6
Age 0–3 years	20.0	24.1	22.5	26.4
Age 4–15 years (4–18 Finland)	25.0	36.6	20.5	30.1
Partnership status				
Single	35.6	27.5	29.3	26.4
Cohabiting	22.9	22.6	25.0	24.9
Married	41.5	49.9	45.7	48.7
Income (monthly, ln)	7.8 (0.8)	7.6 (0.7)	7.0 (2.34)	5.7 (3.0)
Number of children in the hh	0.9 (1.2)	1.2 (1.3)	0.5 (0.6)	0.7(0.6)
Labour market activity				
Employed	83.9	80.2	91.4	79.5
Unemployed	7.9	6.7	5.0	2.9
Outside the labour force	8.2	13.1	3.7	17.6
Initial educational level FIN/GB				
Basic/None	20.2	12.6	4.6	4.6
General Sec./A-levels	43.0	34.7	29.2	26.4
Vocational Sec./O-levels	7.0	5.3	26.5	26.5
Opisto/Other	10.1	16.8	10.3	10.0
Bachelor (poly)/Tertiary	8.3	13.5	29.4	32.6
Bachelor University/-	0.5	1.3	n/a	n/a
Master (poly)/-	0.2	0.5	n/a	n/a
Academic tertiary/-	9.8	14.5	n/a	n/a
Doctorate/-	1.0	0.9	n/a	n/a
Age (from 16 in GB)	36.1 (7.6)	36.5 (7.4)	17.0 (7.3)	17.1 (7.2)
Country (GB only)				
England			88.0	84.7
Wales			4.6	5.9
Scotland			7.4	9.5
Sample				
Birth cohort	1965–1985	1965–1985	1966–1984	1966–1984
No of persons	784,822	736,581	1,848	1,948
N (person-years)	11,979,879	10,551,954	17,070	19,456

Notes: The means (percentages) of variables refer to person-years. Statistics for continuous variables show also standard deviation in brackets.

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