

New realities after early widowhood: reconfiguring work-family dynamics from a quantitative perspective

Margaux Tocqueville (PhD Student). Extended abstract (2-4 pages)

Introduction

In France, the 30 years after the Second World War were marked by high marriage rates, preceding a long-term decline. The early 1970s brought an end to a period described as the “golden age” of marriage by some demographers: starting in 1972, the annual number of marriages declined (Toulemon, 1996). According to L. Toulemon, the number of marriages has dropped by 40% since the 1970s, despite population growth (Toulemon, 1996). This decline reflects a major change: cohabitation without marriage. Though cohabitation existed before, it spread to all age groups from the 1960s onwards, with long-lasting couples forming (Régner-Loilier 2023; Toulemon 1996). Despite these significant evolutions, some categories of public policy and research remain defined by marital status, such as widowhood.

A widowed traditionally refers to someone whose spouse has died and who has not remarried which overlooks the declining marriage rates and the rise of cohabitation. We propose an extended definition of widowhood, relying on a *de facto* situation: experiencing a partner’s death, regardless of legal matrimonial status. Early widowhood refers to cases occurring before age 55, a conventional threshold in France that aligns with public and social policies. Thanks to the decline in under-60 mortality, couples live longer and age at widowhood raised (Monnier et Pennec 2002; Rebière et al. 2023). Therefore, experiencing a widowhood during working age is rarer. For example, in France, 360,000 early widowhoods occurred before 1999. During the 2010’s, we estimate over 210,000 early widowhoods.

Despite its profound impact on individuals’ lives, early widowhood remains a marginal topic in demographic research as it falls between research fields: too exceptional for separation studies, yet too young for most studies on widowhood. Consequently, its effects, especially on employment, are under-documented though it’s an early widowhood particularity to occur during the working age.

Moreover, an early widowhood demands to readjust work and family time division. Therefore, early widowed truly meet new realities, as they suddenly have to complete things that used to be shared between the two partners.

Our problematic for this presentation is the following: does a premature death of a partner affect working life, as early widowed have to readjust and rebalance their working and family life, in sum, to deal with a new reality coming up?

Data and methods

Hypotheses

Working life rearrangements can be highlighted through at least two behaviours: a mobility to a part-time or a change in activity rate. We have two hypotheses:

H1. Parents will face the most changes, compared to childless widowed, as they have to redefine and rebalance their family life and professional life: they can quit their activity or adjust their working time in order to readjust and rebalance their family and professional life.

H2. Widowed fathers can rely on a third party to take care of their children (Flammant, Pennec, et Toulemon 2020). Therefore, they might experience less frequently a change in their working time or their activity rates than mothers.

These assumptions must take into consideration other factors: depending on their age or social status, early widowed may tend to rearrange their professional activity in different ways. For example, working class people are more likely to experience inactivity periods, in the general population (Bonnal et Fougère 1990; Gautié 2009; Insee 2018, 2024) as well as following a separation (C. Bonnet et al., 2010, 2015). This effect may be strengthened by early widowhood and is included in our results.

In order to test these hypotheses, we draw on the Permanent Demographic Sample data. This data system combines several sources, enabling the identification of early widowhood situations and measure its consequences.

Data : French permanent demographic sample

The extended definition of early widowhood requires the identification of couples living together beyond marital status categories. The French Permanent Demographic Sample records life events such as births or marriage and provides information about cohabiting couples, married or not, thanks to administrative data. Thus, civil and *de facto* widowed can be identified as well.

The estimation of early widowhood is based on the identification of cohabiting couples and their ending. A cohabiting couple refers to two adults registered as a couple and living in the same household. Their ending corresponds to living with a partner one year (T) but not the next (T+1). The partner's death is then identified using the exhaustive death records. As a result, over 200,000 people were identified as early widowed from 2010 to 2018, or about 20,000 per year.

Methods

We draw on two sets of methods to investigate reorganisation of working life following early widowhood. First, we use a descriptive analysis of work-time changes and activity rates. Second, based on a discrete-time logistic regression, we explore more individual characteristics involved in these movements.

A descriptive approach with employment rate and mobility rate to a different working time

Activity rates are calculated by dividing the number of male or female in employment a given year by the number of early widowed male or female. Professional mobility rates, meanwhile, measure the number of male or female who experienced a working time change over the year, relative to the total number of early widowed male or female. Both of them express a number of male or female in employment or experiencing a change in their working time, out of 100 male or female .

These rates, before and after early widowhood, enable us to determine if changes contributed to modify the professional activity characteristics before and after the event. In order to understand more clearly the joint effects of various characteristics, particularly gender and presence of children, we then mobilise discrete-time logistic regression models.

A multilevel analysis with discrete-time logistic regression

A discrete-time logistic regression model is a statistical analysis used to study the long-term effects of various characteristics. The time course is called discrete since each year corresponds to a single variable included in the model and is not a continuous variable. In this paper, we cover the time interval between seven years ($n-7$) prior to early widowhood to seven years after ($n+7$), corresponding to 15 time-related variables. Year n refers to the early widowhood year.

Two events are modelled: transition from full-time to part-time work and employment status in a given year and a *stepwise* method is applied to investigate changes in the effects of variables added, i.e. by adding variables of interest step by step. This method is designed to determine whether the observed effect of a characteristic persists once all variables have been taken into account.

In order to distinguish the effect of gender on professional activity, we include an interaction between being a male and experiencing early widowhood. In addition, the following characteristics are added: age at widowhood, presence of children, socio-professional category, and employment characteristics (type of contract and working time).

We then calculate the likelihood of remaining in full-time employment or in employment at any time since early widowhood.

Findings

Here are some findings that will be presented:

Results on activity rate and transition to part-time employment

- Most of the time, early widowhood does not affect much transition to part-time employment: 2 to 10 widows transition to part-time employment during first year of widowhood, almost as much as the year before, same for widowers. Both mothers and fathers experience fewer changes to part-time positions.
- A declining employment rate after early widowhood, especially for fathers with young children and the opposite for mothers. Before the partner's loss, both male and female are active. The first year of widowhood is critical for both male and female with a clear break-up compared to previous years. Though activity rates raise quickly after widowhood for female, it reaches a plateau for male, especially when they have children.

Results on discrete-time logistic regression:

- **Mothers adjust their working-time after widowhood:** regardless of the number of years since widowhood, part-time transitions are less common for male than female. Yet, having children at the time of early widowhood affects both male and female, meaning that fathers experience changes in their working time as frequently as mothers, even though they are rare among male. Although descriptive analyses indicate that childless widowers more frequently transition to part-time work, logistic regression reveals that this effect is mainly explained by age and characteristics of employment. When these characteristics are accounted for, widowed fathers are more likely than childless widowers to transition to part-time work over time. Such transitions remain rare compared to mothers: in five years of widowhood, 4 out of 10 fathers transitioned to part-time work, compared to more than 6 out of 10 mothers.
- **While fathers leave it:** our second model reveals an increasing risk, for male, to quit their employment after widowhood, even when they have children. Thus, seven years after widowhood, half of young children's fathers will have quit their occupational activity, a proportion that increases with age. By comparison, 3 out of 10 childless widows, 4 out of 10 widowed mothers and 4 out of 10 childless widowers will have quit their occupational activity after seven years.