

Gender Inequalities in Outsourcing Domestic Work during Widowhood : Economic Constraint or Competence Deficit ?

Jeanne BELLY LE GUILLOUX ¹ & Zachary VAN WINKLE ²

Short Abstract (150 words)

Although shaped by economic resources and gendered household labor, little is known about how widows and widowers outsource domestic work to cope with everyday life before and following spousal death. Three research questions are addressed: How does the probability of outsourcing domestic work change across the widowhood process? Are there gender differences? Do these gender differences vary across welfare regimes? Using data from the Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) and fixed-effects regressions, we estimate changes in outsourcing domestic chores, meal preparation, and personal care up to five years before and after spousal death, by gender. The probability of outsourcing rises in the year of spousal death and continues to increase thereafter. Widowers are considerably more likely to outsource than widows, reflecting men's lower domestic experience and women's economic hardships. The gender gap is substantial in Nordic and Continental Europe, but largely absent in Southern European countries.

¹ Centre for Research on Social Inequalities, Sciences Po, CNRS, Paris

² Centre for Research on Social Inequalities, Sciences Po, CNRS, Paris; Nuffield College, University of Oxford, UK; Einstein Center Population Diversity, Berlin

Introduction

The transition to widowhood is one of the most critical life events that requires massive adjustment from the surviving spouse (Michael & Ben-Zur, 2007). Widowhood, which occurs at older age in most contemporary societies, is often preceded by periods of spousal caregiving (Ornstein et al., 2017, 2019). To-be widows and widowers confronted with the emotional and physical challenges of caregiving often experience social isolation (Bolano & Arpino, 2020), declines in mental and physical health (Williams et al., 2008), and even cognitive deterioration (Wu-Chung et al., 2022) well before bereavement takes place. Following spousal death, surviving spouses are confronted by profound grief and a new daily life without their spouse (Baumbach et al., 2024).

Most social scientific research on pre- and post-bereavement adjustment focuses on widows' and widowers' mental health (Siflinger, 2017; Van Winkle & Konechni, 2025), economic wellbeing (Angel et al., 2007; Bíró, 2013; Kapelle & Van Winkle, 2024) or mortality (Elwert & Christakis, 2008, 2011). Limited qualitative or mixed-methods studies based on small samples outline how widows and widowers cope and meet the challenge of everyday living following widowhood (see DiGiacomo et al., 2013; Gibson et al., 2019; Groh & Saunders, 2020; Bijnsdorp et al., 2022 for examples). Next to relying on family or others to provide informal care, older surviving spouses may often resort to outsourcing domestic work to professional services. However, few studies provide detailed population level estimates of outsourcing across the widowhood process, let alone an assessment by gender and across welfare state regimes. In light of the gendered patterns of economic wellbeing in widowhood as well as of life-long domestic work distribution, we expect such outsourcing to largely vary between men and women. Further, we seek to decompose this inequality into what is driven by widows' economic constraints on one hand and by widowers' inability to perform and manage domestic tasks by themselves on the other.

We assess three research questions to begin and address these research gaps. First, how does the probability to outsource domestic work change across the widowhood process? Specifically, we use data from the Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) and fixed effects regressions to estimate change in outsourcing domestic chores, meal preparation, and personal care up to five years prior and five years following spousal death. Second, are there gender differences in the probability to outsource domestic work across the widowhood process, by chore? In the context of a male-breadwinner female-homemaker division of labor, it is hypothesized that men may be less able to provide for themselves following spousal death, while women may be less likely to afford outsourcing even when they need help. Third, do the gendered differences in the probability to outsource domestic work across the widowhood process vary across European welfare state regimes? Specifically, we expect that gender differences may attenuate in more gender egalitarian contexts in Nordic welfare states compared to the more family-oriented welfare states of Continental and Southern Europe.

Data & Methods

Analytical sample

Our aim was to assess the consequences of spousal loss on the probability of surviving spouses to resort to professional domestic care services in a sample of persons who were observed to transition from marriage to widowhood. We drew on data from the Survey of Health, Ageing, and Retirement in Europe (SHARE) (Börsch-Supan et al., 2013) to test our hypotheses. SHARE is a cross-national household panel study that collects information on health, socio-economic status and social and family networks of individuals aged 50 or older on a biennial basis.

We first restricted our country sample to those who participated in at least five regular waves. This ensures that our potential window of observation was long enough to observe transitions into widowhood. Our sample included individuals from Austria, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, France, Denmark, Greece, Switzerland, Belgium, Israel, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovenia, and Estonia. We then generated a sample of individuals who were married or in a registered partnership at their first regular observation and who were observed to transition to widowhood. We included all regular observations following spousal loss regardless of whether widows or widowers re-partner. Finally, we restricted our sample of widows and widowers to persons who entered retirement prior to widowhood or in the year of spousal death. We classified individuals as retired if they (a) declared being in retirement or (b) were 55 years or older and declared being permanently sick or a homemaker.

Focus variables

To capture the probability of widows and widowers to resort to formal domestic care services, three binary variables are extracted from SHARE : 1) Help with personal care (such as getting in and out of bed, dressing, bathing), 2) Help with domestic tasks (such as cleaning and ironing) and 3) Meals-on-wheels (i.e. prepared meals provided provided by a municipality or a private provider). The variables of resort to each of these services takes the value of 1 if a respondent declared to have received at least one of the professional or paid services cited in the category over the course of the past year, and is 0 otherwise. In addition, a general measure of resort to domestic help services is set to 1 if any of the three sorts of service is consumed and 0 if none of the three is.

The main explanatory variable was a categorical indicator of the time since widowhood in six categories: (1) five or more years prior to spousal death, (2) three to four years prior to spousal death, (3) one or two years prior to spousal death, (the year of spousal death, (3) one or two years, (4) three or four years, and (5) five or more years after bereavement.

Analytical Approach

To analyze the association between widowhood and resort to professional domestic help, we conducted regression analyses using a fixed effects regression approach. To ease the readability of the results, coefficients are presented in graphical format. Fixed effects regression models leveraged the panel data and made exclusive use of the within-individual variation in the explanatory and outcome variables over time (Allison, 2009). This approach more appropriately addressed selection effects. Thus, time-invariant observed or unobserved factors (e.g., family background, gender, or ethnicity) did not bias our fixed effects analyses, thereby reducing omitted variable bias.

Within the widowed sample, we first calculated the average probability of outsourcing care during the pre-widowhood period for each individual. In the models, probabilities changes are expressed in reference to the first observation period (i.e. 5 years before spousal death). For visualisation purposes, changes in the probability of resorting to professional help in subsequent years since spousal death are expressed relative to this personal baseline. A value of 0 indicates no change from the pre-widowhood level, while positive values indicate an increase in the likelihood of outsourcing domestic chores after widowhood, and negative values indicate a decrease.

As different effects are expected by gender, separate analyses are conducted between men and women. In order to capture the heterogeneity across welfare regime types, we also group countries following this typology : Northern welfare regimes (highest levels of social insurance, individual-based), Continental welfare regimes (principle of security), and Mediterranean welfare regimes (low social assurance, family-based).

Results

Outsourcing daily tasks over the widowhood process

Figure 1 presents the relative change in the probability to use professional services for daily tasks over the process of widowhood (see Table 1 for regression results). The first signs of widowhood anticipation start as early as around 2 to 1 years before the spouse's death, on professional assistance with chores and meals specifically (chores: +4.6 points; meals: +2.1 points) while help with personal nursing remains largely unchanged. Such modification of behaviors prior to spousal death constitute further evidence for the relevance of conceptualizing widowhood as a process in time which begins well before the actual status of widow or widower, thereby better accounting for the early consequences of living with a terminally ill spouse.

Figure 1: Change in probability of outsourcing daily tasks over the widowhood process

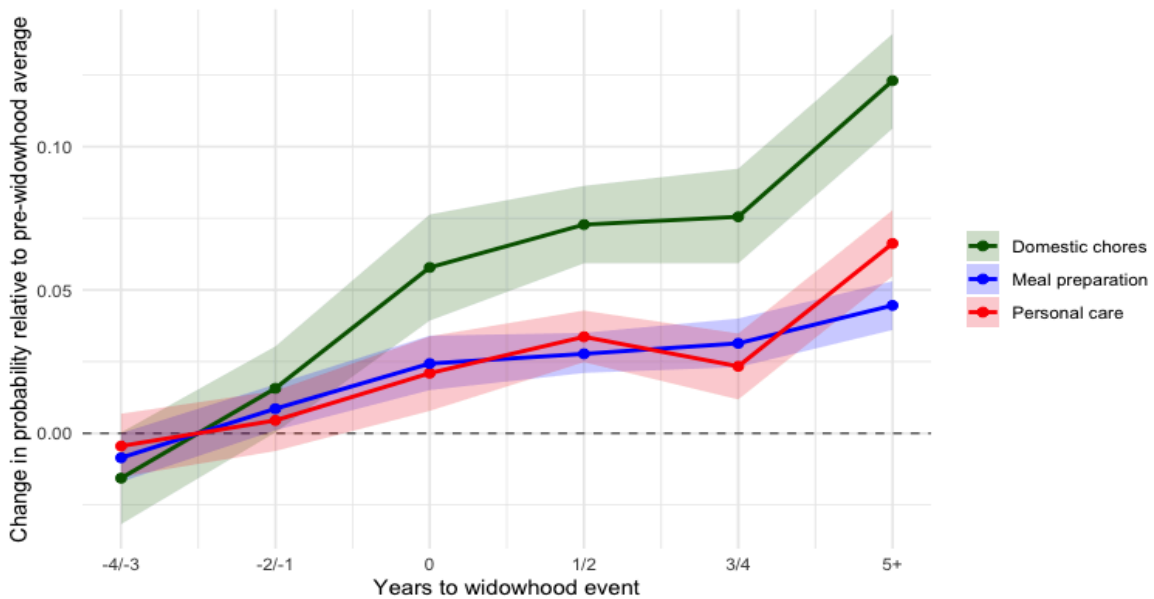


Table 1. Fixed-effects regression of widowhood duration on outsourcing daily tasks

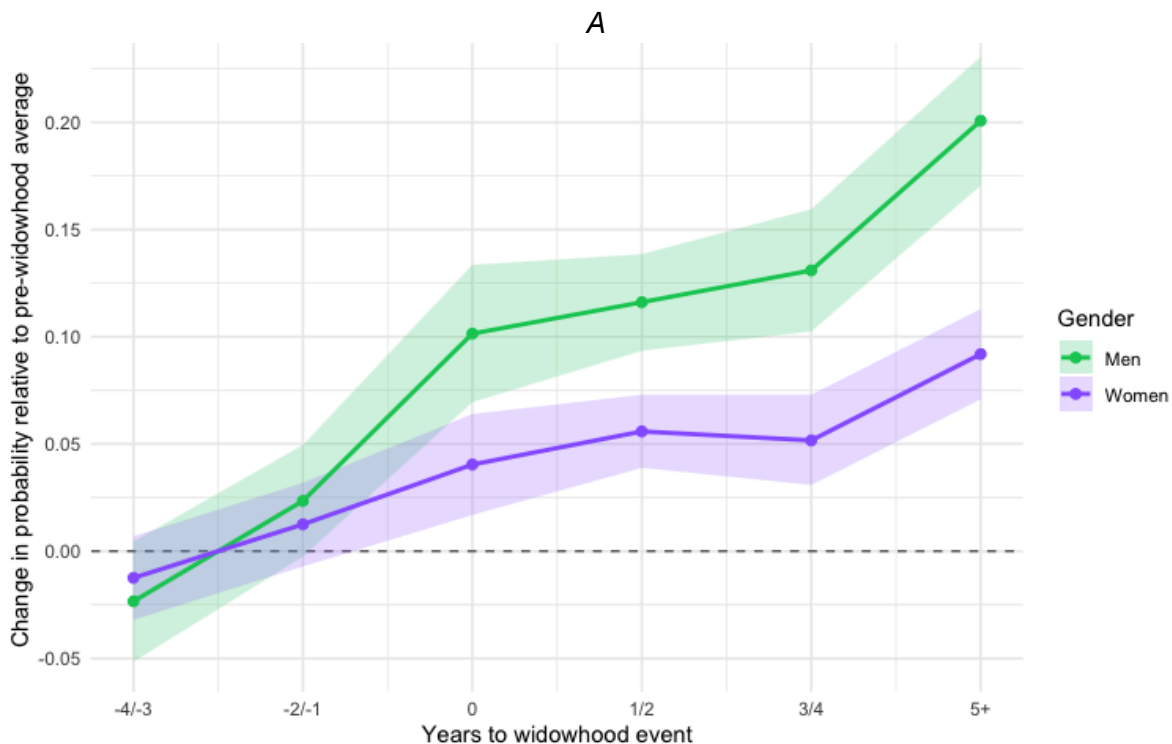
Effect of the transition to widowhood on outsourcing daily care						
Three types of services: Chores, Personal care, Meals						
Time to widowhood (ref = pre-widowhood)	Chores		Personal Care		Meals	
	Estimate	95% CI	Estimate	95% CI	Estimate	95% CI
-4/-3 years	0.015	(-0.001, 0.031)	-0.009	(-0.02, 0.002)	0.003	(-0.005, 0.012)
-2/-1 years	0.046	(0.031, 0.061) ***	0.000	(-0.011, 0.01)	0.021	(0.013, 0.029) ***
Year 0	0.089	(0.07, 0.107) ***	0.016	(0.003, 0.029) *	0.036	(0.027, 0.046) ***
+1/+2 years	0.103	(0.09, 0.117) ***	0.029	(0.02, 0.038) ***	0.040	(0.033, 0.047) ***
+3/+4 years	0.106	(0.09, 0.123) ***	0.019	(0.007, 0.03) **	0.043	(0.035, 0.052) ***
+5+ years	0.154	(0.137, 0.17) ***	0.061	(0.05, 0.073) ***	0.057	(0.048, 0.065) ***

At the time of spousal death (Year 0), there is a sharp rise in professional help for chores and meals, and a modest increase in personal care help (chores: +8.9 points; meals: +3.6 points; nursing: +1.6 points), all of which the regression model displayed in Table 1 supports as significant. Post-widowhood (between 1 and 4 years after), the resort to professional services continues to grow, particularly for domestic chores, with meals showing moderate increases and personal care services rising more slowly (at years +1/+2, chores: +10.3points; meals: +4.0 points; nursing: +2.9 points). By five or more years after widowhood, all forms of professional assistance remain elevated in relation to baseline levels, with the largest sustained increase observed for household chores. Overall, these results indicate that widowhood is significantly associated with a gradual and lasting increase in outsourcing daily tasks to professional services, most pronounced for domestic chores, moderately for meal preparation, and to a lesser extent for personal care.

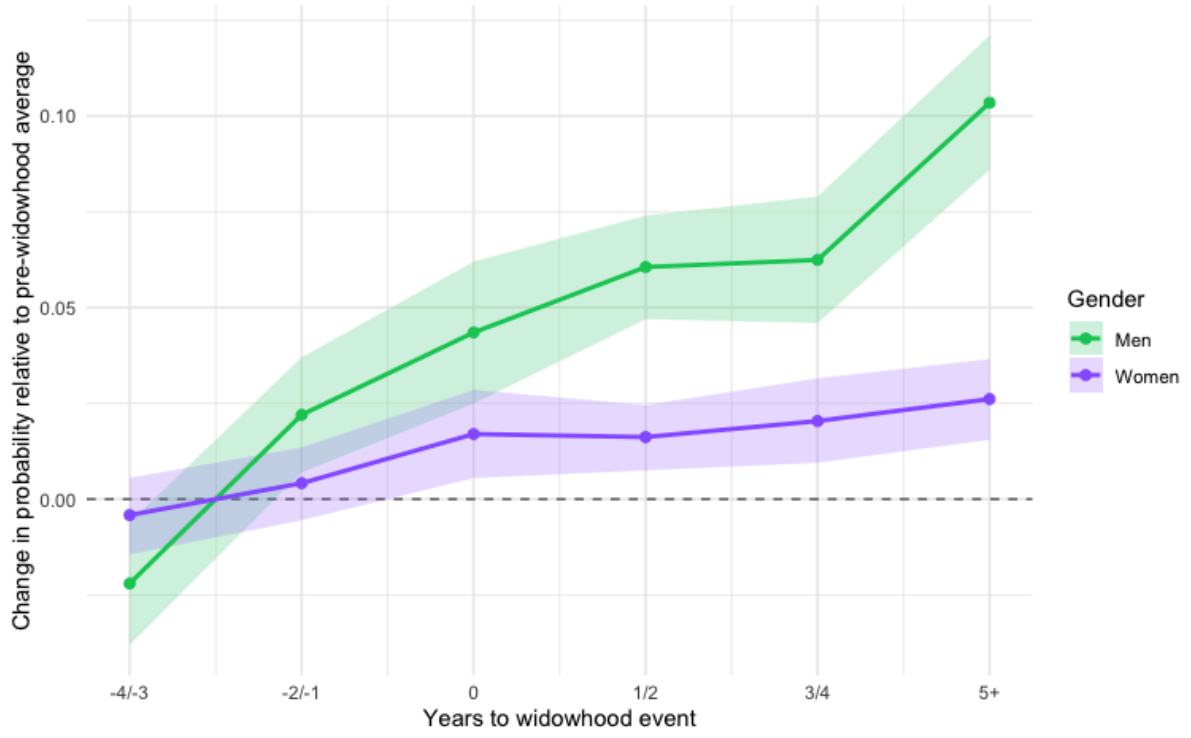
Gendered patterns in outsourcing daily tasks over the widowhood process

Figure 2 shows the relative change in the probability to use professional services for daily tasks over the process of widowhood separately for men and women (see Tables A1-A3 in the appendix for regression results). Across all three types of professional services (domestic chores, meal preparation and personal care) men consistently show larger increases than women in the probability of outsourcing assistance over the widowhood process. For domestic chores, men’s estimated increase starts moderately before widowhood and rises sharply after spousal death, whereas women experience smaller but still significant increases over the same period. The gender gap in outsourcing domestic chores is already visible in the anticipation of the widowhood event but further grows immediately after year 0.

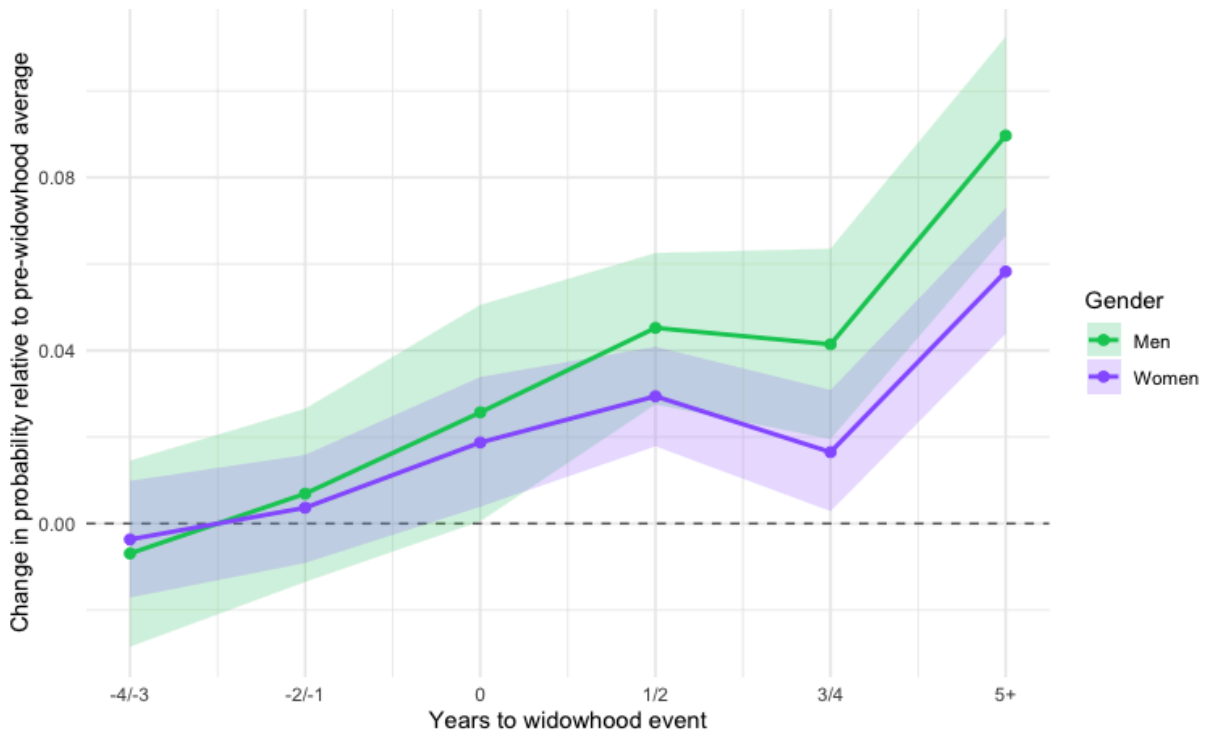
Figure 2: Change in probability of outsourcing a) domestic chores, b) meal preparation, and c) personal care over the widowhood process, by gender



B



C

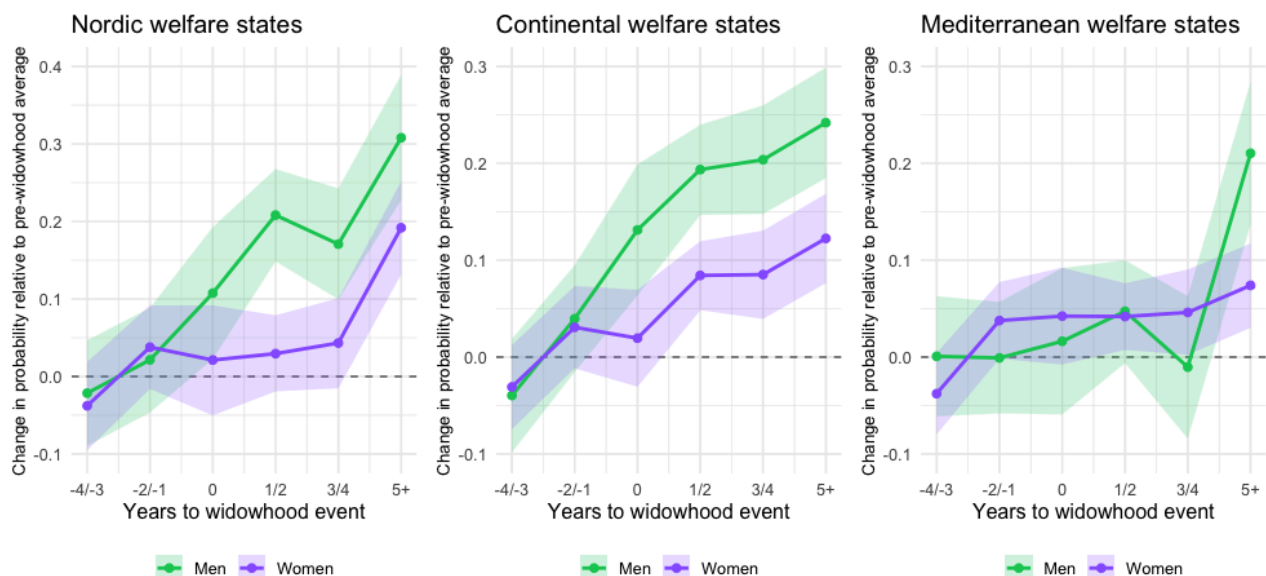


Regarding meal preparation, men also show larger and earlier increases than women. Yet, as opposed to domestic chores, most of the gender differences seem to grow prior to the event of spousal death. Men not only start outsourcing earlier than women, their reliance on professional meal services also keep growing longer over the process than it is the case for women: 3 to 4 years post-widowhood, the probability change for men to outsource to such assistance is about 2,5 times higher than that of women. Personal care shows a similar pattern, though with the smallest overall changes among the different types of services, with men exhibiting again higher estimates than women in the years just before spousal death. The difference is maintained in the years immediately following widowhood since both men and women outsource more assistance within this period, and grows even larger as men further increase their reliance after three to four years. Taken together, the results indicate that while both men and women increase their reliance on professional support after widowhood, men consistently show larger and earlier increases, highlighting a gendered pattern in outsourcing daily tasks both anticipating and following the loss of a spouse.

Variation of gendered patterns across welfare regimes

Figure 3 shows the relative change in the probability to use professional services for daily tasks over the process of widowhood separately for men and women across welfare regimes. In light of the typical levels of gender distribution of roles across welfare regimes, we expected results to display the strongest gendered pattern in Mediterranean countries, and the least in Nordic countries. On the contrary, the changes in reliance on professional services appear to vary more between men and women in the latter as well as in continental countries. While further investigation is required, a possible explanation for these observations could be that the responsibilities of caring for a widow or widower are instead taken by family members in the typically less individual-centered regimes of Southern Europe.

Figure 3: Change in probability of outsourcing any daily task over the widowhood process, by gender and across welfare regime



Discussion

This paper will seek to reinforce and complete the preliminary findings presented above in order to establish a clear picture of 1) the gendered patterns of outsourcing personal and house chores over the process of widowhood and 2) the mechanisms behind, both at the household and at the national welfare system levels. In next steps, we will ascertain the extent to which the gender gap in autonomy across the widowhood process can be attenuated by pre-widowhood caregiving roles and within-couple labor gaps. In other words, attention will be drawn to the life-long typical domestic roles taken, the economic well-being of the surviving spouses, and how much these factors explain the variation between male and female surviving spouses' use of professional care services. At a larger scale, the heterogeneity of patterns by welfare system will be more precisely delved into as we expect that typical gender roles in old age couples are highly tied to national social contexts, such as with varying female labor participation, institutionalization levels among elders or availability of public support schemes. Considering the preliminary results, such further models will account for the use of alternatives to professional outsourcing such as the importance of family as a resource for care that may compensate for spousal loss in the Mediterranean welfare context.

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Appendix

Table A1. Fixed-effects regression of widowhood duration on outsourcing domestic chores, by gender

Effect of the transition to widowhood on outsourcing domestic chores				
Time to widowhood	Men		Women	
	Estimate	95% CI	Estimate	95% CI
-4/-3 years	0.038	(0.01, 0.066) **	0.003	(-0.017, 0.022)
-2/-1 years	0.085	(0.059, 0.111) ***	0.028	(0.008, 0.047) **
Year 0	0.163	(0.131, 0.195) ***	0.055	(0.032, 0.079) ***
+1/+2 years	0.178	(0.155, 0.2) ***	0.071	(0.054, 0.088) ***
+3/+4 years	0.192	(0.164, 0.221) ***	0.067	(0.046, 0.088) ***
+5+ years	0.262	(0.232, 0.292) ***	0.107	(0.086, 0.128) ***

Table A2. Fixed-effects regression of widowhood duration on outsourcing meal preparation, by gender

Effect of the transition to widowhood on outsourcing meal preparation				
Time to widowhood	Men		Women	
	Estimate	95% CI	Estimate	95% CI
-4/-3 years	-0.006	(-0.022, 0.01)	0.007	(-0.003, 0.017)
-2/-1 years	0.038	(0.023, 0.053) ***	0.016	(0.006, 0.025) **
Year 0	0.060	(0.041, 0.078) ***	0.028	(0.017, 0.04) ***
+1/+2 years	0.077	(0.063, 0.09) ***	0.028	(0.019, 0.036) ***
+3/+4 years	0.078	(0.062, 0.095) ***	0.032	(0.021, 0.043) ***
+5+ years	0.119	(0.102, 0.137) ***	0.038	(0.027, 0.048) ***

Table A3. Fixed-effects regression of widowhood duration on outsourcing personal care, by gender

Effect of the transition to widowhood on outsourcing personal care				
Time to widowhood	Men		Women	
	Estimate	95% CI	Estimate	95% CI
-4/-3 years	-0.003	(-0.025, 0.018)	-0.012	(-0.025, 0.002)
-2/-1 years	0.010	(-0.01, 0.03)	-0.004	(-0.017, 0.008)
Year 0	0.029	(0.004, 0.054)	*	0.011 (-0.004, 0.026)
+1/+2 years	0.049	(0.031, 0.066)	***	0.022 (0.01, 0.033) ***
+3/+4 years	0.045	(0.023, 0.067)	***	0.009 (-0.005, 0.023)
+5+ years	0.093	(0.07, 0.116)	***	0.050 (0.036, 0.065) ***