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The traps and trade-offs of rural life: geographic residence, gender wage gaps and work-family deliberations

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ABSTRACT

A common notion in the literature on labor market gender inequality is that women compromise their wage and career prospects by choosing jobs that make room for care responsibilities. The article investigated whether such trade-offs have a geographic dimension. Based on survey data of individuals raised in small towns/rural municipalities in Sweden ($n \approx 2200$), the study analyzed how gender gaps in wages on the one hand and work-family conflict on the other differed between individuals who remained in small towns/rural areas and those who moved to large cities. The results show that the gender gap in wages was larger among stayers, while the opposite was true for work-family conflict. Thus, work-family trade-offs are linked to the choice of geographic context. Meanwhile, initial occupational priorities were more complex than suggested in the literature. Female stayers prioritized family-friendly work conditions higher than male stayers and female movers, but were not less career-oriented, and occupational choices did not explain their lower wages and work-family conflict. At the same time, female stayers worked fewer hours than other groups, and such adaptations accounted for the geographic variation in gender gaps.

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Introduction

Without a doubt, the emergence of a dual-earner society has strengthened women's empowerment and substantially improved gender equality in several areas. At the same time, the task of balancing the demands from paid work and family also brings new dilemmas, and the burden falls disproportionately on women, who still bear the main responsibility for housework and childcare (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016). In this situation, women may sacrifice wage and career prospects by choosing jobs with family-friendly work conditions, and such trade-offs have been discussed as an important driver of labor market gender inequality (Estevez-Abe, 2006; Goldin, 2014). The study

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presented below adds a new perspective by asking whether gendered work-family trade-offs have a geographic dimension.

In many European countries, the outmigration from rural areas is dominated by young women. Since such gendered patterns can exacerbate regional imbalances in demographic vulnerability and labor shortages (Eurostat, 2024; Slätmo, 2024), there is reason to explore drivers and opportunities from a gender perspective. In the study, survey data from Sweden ($n \approx 2200$) are used to explore whether women's choice between staying in small towns/rural municipalities and moving to larger cities reflects a trade-off between work and family involvement. We study how gender gaps in wages on the one hand and work-family conflict on the other vary between stayers and movers, and whether such variation can be explained by different prioritization of family-friendly work. The study deepens and updates existing knowledge about regional variation in gender equality and makes a unique contribution to research on gender wage gaps and work-family conflict, where the geographic dimension has been largely missing.

In the literature review below, we will first present the trade-off argument in relation to research on gender wage gaps and work-family conflict and then move on to geographic research on regional gender inequality and rural-urban migration.

Wages, work-family conflict and women's trade-offs

The notion of family-friendly job choices has become a central point of departure for researchers exploring the persistent gender wage gap. The trade-off argument represents an update of Gary Becker's original hypothesis that men and women make 'sector-specific' human capital investments (Becker, 1991). Here, Becker claimed that men will maximize their investments in the labor market, while women invest in the human capital of children and spouses because families benefit economically from within-couple specialization. From the late 1960s, however, the male breadwinner-female homemaker model gradually weakened in many OECD countries. As women increased their labor force participation and their investments in higher education, the gender wage gap narrowed substantially, but after the mid-1980s, the reduction slowed and, puzzlingly, this slowdown was particularly pronounced among the highly educated (Blau & Kahn, 2017; Goldin, 2014; for Sweden see Boye et al., 2017). To understand why traditional human capital variables explained less of the wage gap, researchers developed new theories about women's work-family trade-offs.

A fundamental idea in the trade-off argument is that some occupations are more changeable and demanding than others due to technical development and market exposure, and that, in these occupations, work interruptions due to, e.g. parental leaves and part-time work are problematic (e.g. Polachek, 1981; Polavieja, 2007). Since women are assumed to accommodate their (future) family responsibilities in their occupational choices, this will result in occupational gender segregation and wage gaps (e.g. Estevez-Abe, 2006). Even within broad occupations, however, such deliberations may guide women's choice of jobs. In particular, many researchers have argued that women prioritize flexible work arrangements that allow them to care for their families and that such priorities exclude them from high-paying jobs that demand constant availability in the form of long hours and 'face time' in the workplace (Glauber, 2011; Goldin, 2014; Magnusson, 2021).¹

At the same time, there is another side to the story. Since the trade-off argument suggests that women make choices to reduce tensions between work and caregiving obligations, the result should also be reflected in perceptions of work-family conflict. Work-family conflict can be regarded as a special case of stress produced by modern dual-earner societies (Grönlund & Öun, 2010) and the construct has a strong standing in work-family research (Lavassani & Movahedi, 2014; Pitt-Catsoupes et al., 2006). Originally, it was defined as an inter-role conflict reflecting incompatible role pressures from the work and family domains (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985), but later it has come to be regarded as bi-directional (e.g. Allen et al., 2015). In this study, we focus on work-to-family conflict, which is the most common and most commonly studied type, and for this type of conflict, work-related factors are central predictors (Byron, 2005; Michel et al., 2011).² In particular, studies have focused on the importance of work hours and working time arrangements, but also on strain, as measured by job demands (e.g. workload, time pressure) as well as employee control (Byron, 2005; Michel et al., 2011). Perceptions of work-family conflict have also been related to negative health outcomes such as depression and anxiety, as well as with lower job and life satisfaction and worse parent-child relationships (Allen et al., 2000).

Although women commonly report a higher level of work-family conflict, some studies find no significant gender gap (Byron, 2005). To understand such divergencies, it must be recognized that work-family conflict is a residual concept, which measures the perception of stress after different strategies to resolve the competing demands from work and family have been employed (Grönlund & Öun, 2010; cf. Carlson & Grzywacz, 2008). Presumably, both the need to manage work-family conflict and conceivable strategies will differ between men and women. In particular, gender differences in work-family conflict tend to increase after accounting for work hours, as part-time work provides a main tool by which women keep work-family conflict down (Grönlund & Öun, 2010). The importance of flexible scheduling has also been widely explored in the field (Byron, 2005; Michel et al., 2011). As explained above, however, the opportunities for such family adjustments may vary between occupations and jobs. The issue of family-friendly career choices has been less explored in this field, but several studies refute the idea that work conditions of female-dominated occupations are particularly family-friendly (Grönlund & Öun, 2018; Magnusson, 2021). At the same time, gender-atypical career choices among women have been associated with a less supportive work-family culture (Cook & Minnotte, 2008) and higher work-family conflict (Maume & Houston, 2001) due to demands for long work hours and constant availability in male-dominated occupations (Grönlund & Öun, 2018; Maume & Houston, 2001).

In summary, the fact that women retain the main responsibility for care work even in the dual-earner society requires trade-offs between career opportunities on the one hand and work-family conflict on the other. However, individuals' strategies can also vary with contextual opportunities and constraints. For both gender wage gaps and work-family conflict, the importance of country context has been highlighted in comparative studies (e.g. Grönlund & Öun, 2010; Mandel & Shalev, 2009), but regional variation within single countries has been little explored. Although geographic researchers have thoroughly documented the existence of an urban wage premium, i.e., a differentiation in wages related to urban density (see e.g. Andersson et al., 2014; Eliasson

& Westerlund, 2023), only a few studies have examined gender differences in this regard (Elass et al., 2024; Hirsch et al., 2013). Meanwhile, gender differences in work-family conflict have not, to our knowledge, been explored from a rural-urban perspective.

Regional gender inequality and rural-urban migration

In recent decades, regional inequality has received new attention in European research and debates, as disparities between metropolitan areas and smaller cities/rural regions have increased in terms of incomes, employment and the skill level of jobs (Iammarino et al., 2019). Such trends have also been documented in Sweden, where regional differences in economic growth have increased substantially from the 1980s, after a long period of convergence (Enflo et al., 2025). The developments suggest that individuals' life chances increasingly vary by geographic location. Arguably, however, such disparities also have a gender dimension. For Sweden, the seminal work of Gunnel Forsberg (1998) showed that despite Sweden's national policies promoting gender equality, gender gaps varied systematically across a range of indicators in what she called regional gender contracts. The most gender equal contracts were found in metropolitan areas and other larger cities, whereas rural areas were more traditional, with, e.g. larger wage gaps and stronger occupational segregation. At the same time, out-migration from rural areas is dominated by women (Eurostat, 2024; Karpestam & Håkansson, 2021). In many countries, this gendered trend leads to a surplus of men in rural areas,³ which increases the demographic vulnerability of regions already characterized by a high old-age dependency ratio (Eurostat, 2024).⁴ Women's out-migration also exacerbates the problems of labor shortages, which are significant in rural Sweden – not least in female-dominated care occupations (Slätmo, 2024).⁵ To date, however, gendered migration patterns have not been sufficiently explored from the perspective of labor market gender inequality and work-family reconciliation.

Given the regional gender contracts and the strong in-migration of women to cities, Forsberg (1998, p. 192) argued that metropolitan areas and larger cities could be regarded as 'escalator regions', to which women move to improve their labor market prospects and obtain more parity with men. Here, it should be noted that the character of inter-regional migration in Sweden has changed over the past decades. With the rise of the dual-earner society, family moves have decreased, and instead, more migrants now move prior to entering the labor market and before starting a family (Lundholm, 2007). Higher education is a strong driver of inter-regional migration in general (Lundholm, 2007) and of its gender composition in particular, since women attend university more often than men (Grönlund & Magnusson, 2024). Moving to a larger city becomes a logical part of women's educational investments, not only because university education is provided in larger cities but also because the return on education is greater there (Backman, 2014). A more general, but little explored, question is whether women who move to large cities improve their wages relative to men and, conversely, if women who remain in small towns/rural areas lose out in terms of relative wages. One reason may be that career jobs are more concentrated in urban areas and that women gain access to these jobs through higher education. Beyond the issue of education, geographic differences in occupational gender segregation may contribute to similar outcomes. Compared to

men, women are strongly clustered in a small number of relatively low-paid occupations (often in care and services) and therefore, the broader labor market offered in larger cities could be particularly important to women's wage prospects (Elass et al., 2024; cf. Forsberg, 1998). Finally, the decision to move out or remain in rural areas may also reflect different priorities and considerations on work-family trade-offs.

As demonstrated in geographic research, contemporary migration decisions reflect more than purely economic considerations. Studies show that, in Sweden and other Nordic countries, such decisions are generally perceived to be voluntary and reflect people's larger life projects, values and attitudes (Lundholm et al., 2004). Moreover, social factors tend to be more important than employment-related factors both in motivating and evaluating migration decisions (Lundholm et al., 2004; Lundholm & Malmberg, 2006; Niedomysl, 2011). Here, small towns and rural areas can have advantages that, for some, may outweigh the economic gains of moving. A comparative study of 27 EU countries shows that rural areas generally offer better housing than cities, and also better environments in terms of pollution, noise and crime (Cyrek & Cyrek, 2025). Several studies also point to a lower prevalence of depression, anxiety and other mental health problems (Peen et al., 2010). For example, a study among youth in northern Sweden reported that feelings of stress and psychological distress were less prevalent in rural than in urban areas, particularly among women (Jonsson et al., 2019). In sum, rural contexts could offer a less stressful lifestyle than large cities, and social ties to family and friends could further motivate individuals to remain in (or return to) such contexts. Swedish studies of migration motives also indicate that social reasons and family factors are particularly important for return migrants and counter-urban movers (Niedomysl & Amcoff, 2011; Sandow & Lundholm, 2020). Given the relative advantages of urban and rural contexts, we may ask whether women's decision to remain in (or return to) small towns/rural municipalities reflects lower career ambitions and a higher priority of care responsibilities and whether such deliberations result in lower levels of work-family conflict among stayers than among movers.

Based on the reasoning above, the study uses Swedish survey data to investigate the geographic dimension of women's work-family trade-offs by comparing gender gaps in wages and work-family conflict among individuals who remained in small towns/rural municipalities and those who moved to large cities.

Sweden offers an interesting case for exploring these issues. Female labor force participation is high by international comparison (Grönlund & Magnusson, 2024) and, along with other Nordic countries, Sweden scores highly on international indices of gender equality (World Economic Forum, 2024). These achievements are commonly attributed to the longstanding policies promoting a dual-earner family model (Korpi et al., 2013), which provide generous parental leaves and affordable full-time daycare for small children. Despite these provisions, however, work-family conflict is comparatively high from a European perspective (Grönlund & Öun, 2010; but see Stier et al., 2012). This is particularly true for mothers, who still take more responsibility for housework and care than men, despite working almost as much as men (Boye & Evertsson, 2015).⁶ Women also fare worse than men in terms of wages and careers, and gender disparities tend to widen with parenthood, reflecting mothers' larger care responsibilities (Angelov et al., 2016; Bygren & Gähler, 2012). Further, gender segregation across occupations and jobs remains a main

driver of gender wage gaps in Sweden, as in other countries (National Mediation Office, 2023).

At the same time, the Nordic region also stands out in terms of geographic challenges. From a European perspective, the region is sparsely populated but also one where a large share of the population is strongly concentrated in a few metropolitan areas and larger cities along the coast.⁷ For decades, population growth has been increasingly concentrated in urban regions, and the trend towards urbanization continues. At the same time, almost half of the population lives outside of these regions, in rural municipalities or small towns, often separated by large distances (Smas, 2018). This unbalanced population composition creates different opportunity structures in different regions and locations. As a result, considerations about moving or staying become central for those who grow up in sparsely populated areas. The gendered migration patterns further indicate that opportunity structures can be perceived differently by men and women (cf. Forsberg, 1998).

Aim and research questions

The aim of the study is to explore whether women in the dual-earner society – represented by Sweden – make a trade-off between career and family involvement and whether such considerations are linked to the choice between rural and urban contexts. To this end, we study how gender gaps in wages on the one hand and work-family conflict on the other vary between stayers in small towns/rural areas and individuals who moved to large cities. A central question is whether such gaps can be explained by women's prioritization of family-friendly work conditions, as captured by occupational choices, care responsibilities and work hour adaptations.

Based on the reasoning above, we pose the following research questions:

RQ 1. Are women more family-oriented and less career-oriented than men in their initial occupational priorities? Are women who stayed in small towns/rural municipalities more family-oriented than male stayers and female movers?

RQ 2a. Do women have lower monthly wages than men, and is the gender wage gap larger among stayers than among movers?

RQ2b. Can such patterns be explained by different work-family priorities, as captured by occupational choices, care responsibilities and work hours?

RQ 3a. Do women perceive a stronger work-family conflict than men, and is this gender difference smaller among stayers than among movers?

RQ3b. Can such patterns be explained by different work-family priorities, as captured by occupational choices, care responsibilities and work hours?

Data and method

The analysis was based on a survey conducted in 2022 that targeted individuals who grew up in small towns/rural municipalities in Sweden. This geographic category is one of three main groups (Group C) in the classification of municipalities established by SALAR, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKR, 2022).

The classification is based on population size and commuting patterns, and the other main groups are large cities (200,000 < inhabitants) and commuter municipalities near large cities (Group A) and medium-sized cities (<40,000 inhabitants) and commuter municipalities near medium-sized cities (Group B). The main groups are further divided into subgroups, which were utilized in the sampling procedure and the analysis (see below).

As mentioned above, the population was limited to individuals who were between 30 and 50 years old at the time of the survey. This means that they are beyond the age when most migration takes place (Lundholm, 2007). Presumably, then, they have made central decisions in terms of location and occupational track and are generally established in the labor market (SCB, 2002). Many have also had the opportunity to become parents and to pursue a career, but are still in their prime working age.

The sample, i.e. individuals born 1971–1991 and raised in small towns/rural municipalities,⁸ was drawn by Statistics Sweden from the national register of the total population and comprised about 600,000 individuals, many of whom had now moved to large or medium-sized cities. To include a sufficiently large number of men and women living in small towns and rural municipalities (including the most sparsely populated parts of this geographic category), the sample was stratified. The 12 strata comprised 600 men and 600 women from each of six geographic categories: Group A, Group B and the four subcategories of Group C,⁹ in total 7200 individuals. Thus, individuals from more rural areas were oversampled, particularly women, since the population in these areas was male-dominated.

The survey was distributed by regular mail (but with an online response option), resulting in a response rate of 31 per cent (2241 respondents). Response rates varied by gender, education and geography, with higher rates for women, university-educated individuals and individuals living in more urbanized areas. A non-response analysis was conducted by Statistics Sweden, informing the design of post-stratification weights. The weights were used in all analyses to correct for the stratified sampling technique (i.e. the oversampling of individuals, especially women, in more rural areas). The weights also corrected for the varying response rates across the strata as well as between individuals with different levels of education. In summary, the weighted analysis provides a representative picture of the population for our central variables.

As mentioned, the overall aim of the analysis was to compare gender patterns between individuals who remained in category C (henceforth: stayers) and individuals who had moved out. To get a detailed picture, stayers were divided into two separate categories: small towns and rural municipalities.¹⁰ However, we also conducted sensitivity analyses in which all stayers are merged into a single category. In the main analyses, stayers are compared with movers to Group A, containing the metropolitan areas (and commuter municipalities). In Europe, metropolitan areas, in particular capital regions, are strong generators of growth, characterized by high incomes, many qualified jobs and large in-migration (Iammarino et al., 2019). In comparison, Group B is a more heterogeneous category of less theoretical interest. However, to gain a comprehensive picture, some further analyses comparing stayers with movers to medium-sized cities have been explored. Finally, it should be noted that the category of stayers also includes return movers, that is, individuals who had lived for some time in large and medium-sized cities. Since it cannot be ruled out that individuals who spent

some time in larger cities could differ in characteristics from those who never moved out, sensitivity analyses were conducted. Results from all these further analyses will be commented on in the text.

Variables and analytical strategy

RQ 1 concerns how the prioritization of family-friendly occupational tracks varies by gender and geography. To capture *occupational priorities*, we utilized nine statements regarding the respondents' motivation for their occupational choice and their priorities in the job search process after graduation from their highest level of education. For each statement, the respondent was asked to indicate how important a particular aspect had been for him/her (four response alternatives: 'not important at all', 'not very important', 'fairly important', 'very important'). Similar analyses of career–family strategies have been conducted in studies of highly educated professionals (Grönlund & Öun, 2018); however, we added two indicators concerning geographic aspects of occupational choice. In a principal component analysis of the response patterns, two separate dimensions were extracted: one principal component characterized by high scores for items related to wages and career prospects and another principal component with high scores for statements related to work-family reconciliation and the importance of being able to choose their place of residence. Interestingly, the geographic indicators clustered with the statements concerning the 'family-friendliness' of jobs and occupations. Based on these results, two additive indexes were constructed labeled career focus (alpha = 0.77) and family focus (alpha = 0.73). Indicators and principal component scores are presented in Appendix Table A1. *Career focus* comprises four statements: good initial wages in occupation; good initial wages in job; possibilities for career advancement and/or good wage development in occupation; possibilities for career advancement and/or good wage development in job (range 0–12). *Family focus* comprises five statements: the occupation provides work hours that can be adapted to family/private life; the job provides work hours that can be adapted to family/private life; the occupation provides possibilities to find employment in the place where I wanted to live; the job provides the possibility to live in the place where I want to; the job does not require long-distance commuting (range 0–15). The higher the value, the more important these aspects were to the respondent.

To address RQ 1, these indices will be used as dependent variables in OLS regressions comparing men and women across and within geographic categories. Results will be presented as predicted values and significance levels.

In the second part of the study, RQ 2 and RQ 3 are addressed in OLS regressions on wages on the one hand and work-family conflict on the other.

Wages are measured as the *logarithm of monthly wages*. Logarithmization is a standard procedure in salary analyses, applied to normalize the data distribution and facilitate the interpretation of effects. When using a logarithmic dependent variable in an OLS regression, a change by one unit in the independent variable produces a percentage change in the dependent variable (Allison, 1999). The following estimation is used to calculate percent change: $100(\exp(b-1))$.

Work-family conflict is captured with an additive index of three questions asking how often the respondent (a) keeps worrying about work problems when he/she is not

working (b) feels too tired after work to enjoy the things he/she would like to do at home (c) finds that his/her job prevents him/her from giving the time he/she wants to his/her partner or family (five response categories: 'never', 'almost never', 'sometimes', 'often', 'always'; index range 3–15, with higher values indicating more conflict; mean 8.70, std 2.41). This is an established measure of work-family conflict, specifically work-to-family conflict, capturing both time and strain-based spillover (Breyer & Bluemke, 2016; Byron, 2005; Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). The measure has been applied in many studies (e.g. Grönlund & Öun, 2018; Li et al., 2021; Ruppanner, 2013).

The regression analyses are performed stepwise following the same logic for wages and work-family conflict. Model 1 includes gender, and in Model 2, education is added. For the wage regressions, also work experience and work experience squared are included, in line with convention. In Model 3, the indicator of *geographic residence* is entered, comprising the four categories described above: large cities (reference group), medium-sized cities, small towns and rural municipalities. Finally, in model 4, *gender*geographic residence* interaction terms are added. Here, we explore whether gender gaps in wages are larger and gender gaps in work-family conflict are smaller among stayers than among movers.

In the following models, we look into the mechanisms highlighted in the trade-off argument by accounting for occupational choices, gendered care obligations and work hours. Based on the theoretical assumption that women's occupational choices reflect long-term investment strategies to accommodate future care responsibilities (Becker, 1985; Estevez-Abe, 2006), *career focus* and *family focus* (continuous variables) are entered in Model 5 to capture occupational priorities. In model 6, *Children < age 7* (yes/no) is entered to proxy gendered care responsibilities. In Sweden, as in many other countries, women take more responsibility for child care (Boye & Evertsson, 2015), and the pre-school years are the most care-intensive. This gendered division of work has strong implications for wages and careers (Boye et al., 2017). At the same time, having pre-school children has also been shown to increase women's level of work-family conflict (Grönlund & Öun, 2010; Michel et al., 2011). In model 7, we control for normal weekly *work hours* (continuous variable). Part-time work remains a driver of gender wage gaps (for Sweden, see National Mediation Office, 2023) but also a main tool for mothers to keep work-family conflict down (Grönlund & Öun, 2010).¹¹ In the empirical analyses, our main interest is to explore whether these factors modify the geographic variation in gender gaps.

Sensitivity analyses were performed with additional demographic variables: age of respondent, partner (no partner/cohabiting/partner but not cohabiting) and older children (8–17 years of age). These analyses did not affect the main results.

Descriptive statistics of dependent and independent variables are presented in [Table 1](#).

Results

Below, we first report how occupational priorities vary by gender and geography (RQ 1). Next, we present the results from regressions on gender gaps in wages (RQ 2) and work-family conflict (RQ 3). The main question is whether these gaps are larger/smaller among stayers than among movers and to what extent they are explained by mechanisms highlighted in the argument about women's work-family trade-offs.

Table 1. Distribution of independent and dependent variables across geographic categories.

		Large city (n = 389)	Medium-sized city (n = 409)	Small town (n = 1092)	Rural municipality (n = 350)
Tertiary education (%)	All	62.5	54.5	30.9	21.0
	Women	72.9	59.2	43.0	30.6
	Men	51.1	49.5	19.7	12.7
Children under 7 (%)	All	28.8	29.3	27.7	25.7
	Women	30.8	26.1	29.8	25.5
	Men	26.6	32.7	25.9	25.9
Years of work experience (means)	All	17.3	19.7	18.8	18.0
	Women	16.4	17.7	17.7	19.2
	Men	18.2	18.4	19.9	20.2
Weekly work hours (means)	All	40.0	38.8	39.0	39.5
	Women	40.0	38.0	37.0	38.2
	Men	40.0	39.7	40.9	40.5
Logged monthly wages (means)	All	10.7	10.6	10.5	10.4
	Women	10.7	10.5	10.4	10.4
	Men	10.7	10.6	10.5	10.5
Work-family conflict (means)*	All	9.1	8.7	8.5	8.8
	Women	9.4	9.0	8.6	8.9
	Men	8.7	8.4	8.5	8.6

*For the construction of the work-family conflict index, see the method section.

Occupational priorities

In RQ 1 we asked – first – whether women more often than men report having prioritized family-friendly work conditions over career goals in their initial occupational choices and – second – whether such priorities are particularly prominent among women who stayed in small towns/rural areas.

Table 2 displays predicted values derived from bivariate regressions conducted to determine how average levels of *career focus* and *family focus* vary by gender and geography (for a description of the indices, see the Data and method section). As shown, respondents who chose to remain in small towns/rural municipalities did not report a lower level of career focus than those who moved to large (or medium-sized) cities. Further, we note that women's level of career focus is not significantly lower than that of men.

Meanwhile, however, both men and women who remained in small towns/rural municipalities report a higher level of family focus than those who moved to large (or medium-sized) cities. Further, we note that women's level of family focus is significantly higher than that of men. This gender pattern is statistically significant in all geographic categories.

Table 2. Occupational priorities by gender and geographic residence. Predicted values derived from bivariate OLS regressions.

	Women		Men	
	Career focus	Family focus	Career focus	Family focus
Large city	6.23	9.27 ¹	6.56	8.27
Medium-sized city	6.38	9.85 ¹	5.93	8.52
Small town	6.05	10.69 ^{1,2}	6.17	9.80 ²
Rural municipality	5.94	11.03 ^{1,2}	6.04	9.74 ²
n	1033	1033	1075	1082

Note: For the construction of the career focus and family focus indexes, see Appendix Table A1. Statistical significance has been examined comparing men and women across and within geographic categories: ¹Women's level of family focus is significantly higher than men's in all geographic categories. ²The level of family focus in small towns and rural municipalities is significantly higher than in large cities and medium-sized cities.

All in all, these patterns show that career and family do not represent an either-or choice in the Swedish dual-earner society, neither for women nor for men. Instead, the findings suggest that women in particular devise strategies to accommodate both career aspirations and family care obligations. Such dual strategies – simultaneously focusing on both family and career goals – are particularly pronounced in more rural contexts.

Somewhat unexpectedly, men in small towns and rural municipalities also report a higher level of family focus than men in large (and medium-sized) cities. To further explore this finding, the items concerning place of residence were removed from the family focus index so that only more specific questions on the family-friendliness of jobs and occupations remained. However, the same patterns appeared with this narrower index. Thus, men who remained in small towns/rural municipalities did not prioritize wage and career opportunities lower than those who moved out; at the same time, they put a higher value on the possibility to adapt work hours to family/private life and to avoid long-distance commuting.

To summarize, the analysis suggests that individuals' decisions to remain in small towns/rural municipalities – rather than moving out – go hand in hand with initial occupational choices that put a higher value on family-friendly work conditions but not a lower priority on wage and career goals. Such dual strategies are particularly evident among women.

Wages

To address RQ2, we performed OLS regressions on *logged monthly wages*. Here, we explored whether there is a gender gap in monthly wages to women's disadvantage and if this gap is larger among stayers in small towns/rural areas than among movers.

The regression results are presented in [Table 3](#). In line with previous research, models 1 and 2 show that there is a gender wage gap to women's disadvantage. This gap increases after controlling for human capital variables, indicating that women receive less compensation for tertiary education. The geographic wage differences displayed in Model 3 are also expected, given the vast documentation of an urban wage premium. In Model 4, interaction terms were entered to explore how the gender gap varied by geography. As shown, the interaction term is negative and statistically significant for both categories in focus, i.e. small towns and rural municipalities. Meanwhile, the woman coefficient – now signifying the gender wage gap among individuals who moved to large cities – is not statistically significant. An explanation could be that the mobility premium is larger for women because their labor market in rural contexts is more restricted to low-paying occupations. However, it cannot be ruled out that women who moved are positively selected on unmeasured characteristics relevant to productivity (cf. Eliasson & Westerglund, 2023). Further analyses show that the gender wage gap in medium-sized cities does not differ significantly from small towns/rural areas.

To explore potential mechanisms behind the geographic variation in the gender wage gap, the indices capturing initial occupational priorities are entered in Model 5. As shown, both are significantly correlated to wages in expected directions; that is, higher levels of career focus imply higher wages, while a stronger family focus implies lower wages. After controlling for occupational priorities, the coefficients for small towns and rural municipalities – that is, the difference in wages between men who

Table 3. Logged monthly wages. OLS regressions. Unstandardized b-coefficients and p-values.¹

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
Intercept	10.57 (0.000)	9.96 (0.000)	10.08 (0.000)	10.04 (0.000)	9.96 (0.000)	9.91 (0.000)	9.38 (0.000)
Woman (ref: Man)	-0.09 (<0.001)	-0.14 (<0.001)	-0.14 (<0.001)	-0.05 (0.169)	-0.02 (0.587)	-0.02 (0.655)	-0.02 (0.669)
Work experience		0.05 (<0.001)	0.05 (<0.001)	0.05 (<0.001)	0.05 (<0.001)	0.05 (<0.001)	0.05 (<0.001)
Work experience ²		-0.00 (<0.001)	-0.00 (<0.001)	-0.00 (<0.001)	-0.00 (<0.001)	-0.00 (<0.001)	-0.00 (<0.001)
Tertiary education (ref: Primary/secondary)		0.27 (<0.001)	0.24 (<0.001)	0.24 (<0.001)	0.22 (<0.001)	0.22 (<0.001)	0.20 (<0.001)
<i>Geographic residence (ref: Large city)</i>							
Medium-sized city			-0.09 (<0.001)	-0.04 (0.258)	-0.02 (0.606)	-0.02 (0.490)	-0.02 (0.480)
Small town			-0.14 (<0.001)	-0.09 (0.005)	-0.06 (0.034)	-0.07 (0.033)	-0.08 (0.005)
Rural municipality			-0.18 (<0.001)	-0.12 (0.002)	-0.09 (0.020)	-0.09 (0.014)	-0.11 (0.002)
Woman* Medium-sized city				-0.10 (0.058)	-0.11 (0.025)	-0.11 (0.034)	-0.09 (0.059)
Woman* Small town				-0.11 (0.014)	-0.11 (0.011)	-0.11 (0.012)	-0.07 (0.087)
Woman* Rural municipality				-0.12 (0.029)	-0.12 (0.023)	-0.12 (0.028)	-0.09 (0.066)
Family focus					-0.02 (<0.001)	-0.02 (<0.001)	-0.01 (<0.001)
Career focus					0.03 (<0.001)	0.03 (<0.001)	0.03 (<0.001)
Children <7 years						0.09 (<0.001)	0.08 (<0.001)
Weekly work hours							0.02 (<0.001)
Adjusted R2 (%)	16.8	16.8	19.1	19.3	24.9	25.8	32.4
n	1745	1745	1745	1745	1745	1745	1745

Note: ¹Bold coefficients are statistically significant at the 5%-level, p-values in brackets.

remained and those who moved out – decrease. However, the interaction terms – signifying the size of the gender gap among those who stayed relative to that among the movers – are not lower than in the previous model; in fact, the woman*rural municipalities interaction coefficient increases and becomes statistically significant. Thus, the reported differences in priorities do not explain women’s larger migration premium. Even though women who remained in small towns/rural municipalities are as career-focused as those who moved to large cities, they do not receive the same return – and this is not explained by their stronger focus on family-friendly work conditions. Further analysis shows that this holds even with the narrower index of family focus described above (see Occupational priorities). Finally, sensitivity analyses show that the results remained robust after including a control variable to differentiate between return movers and other stayers, i.e. individuals who never left.

In model 6, we explore the importance of gendered care responsibilities, proxied by the prevalence of pre-school children. This variable does not further explain the geographic variation of the gender wage gap. After accounting for work hours in model 7, however, all woman*geography interaction terms decrease and lose statistical significance. In other words, the larger gender wage gap in small towns/rural municipalities can be related to the fact that women who stayed in these areas tend to work shorter hours than women who moved to large cities (cf. Table 1).

Work-family conflict

Finally, OLS regressions were conducted to explore whether women perceive a higher level of gender gap in *work-family conflict* than men and whether this gender gap is smaller among stayers than among movers (RQ 3).

The results are displayed in Table 4. Model 1 shows that, overall, women have a significantly higher level of work-family conflict than men. After controlling for education in Model 2, however, the woman coefficient decreases and loses statistical significance. Thus, the

Table 4. Work-family conflict. OLS regressions. Unstandardized b-coefficients and p-values.¹

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6	M7
Intercept	8.52 (0.000)	8.40 (0.000)	8.62 (0.000)	8.37 (<0.001)	8.72 (<0.001)	8.62 (<0.001)	6.58 (<0.001)
Woman (ref: Man)	0.29 (0.011)	0.21 (0.074)	0.21 (0.068)	0.69 (0.012)	0.68 (0.014)	0.69 (0.012)	0.69 (0.012)
Tertiary education (ref: Primary/secondary)		0.38 (0.001)	0.35 (0.005)	0.36 (0.004)	0.38 (0.003)	0.34 (0.006)	0.27 (0.032)
Geographic residence (ref: Large city)							
Medium-sized city			-0.22 (0.239)	-0.13 (0.632)	-0.15 (0.569)	-0.18 (0.507)	-0.17 (0.517)
Small town			-0.33 (0.046)	0.07 (0.776)	0.08 (0.723)	0.08 (0.726)	-0.02 (0.948)
Rural municipality			-0.03 (0.880)	0.24 (0.404)	0.25 (0.387)	0.23 (0.418)	0.15 (0.609)
Woman* Medium-sized city				-0.16 (0.669)	-0.11 (0.764)	0.09 (0.821)	-0.00 (0.994)
Woman* Small town				-0.76 (0.017)	-0.76 (0.018)	-0.77 (0.016)	-0.56 (0.074)
Woman* Rural municipality				-0.51 (0.197)	-0.49 (0.221)	-0.46 (0.247)	-0.35 (0.378)
Family focus					-0.02 (0.414)	-0.02 (0.359)	-0.00 (0.976)
Career focus					-0.04 (0.110)	-0.04 (0.110)	-0.06 (0.009)
Children <7 years						0.46 (<0.001)	0.46 (<0.001)
Weekly work hours							0.05 (<0.001)
Adjusted R2 (%)	0.8	0.8	1.0	1.3	1.4	2.1	4.4
n	1760	1760	1760	1760	1760	1760	1760

Note: ¹Bold coefficients are statistically significant at the 5%-level, p-values in brackets.

gender difference in the previous model reflected the fact that highly educated individuals report more work-family conflict and that tertiary education is more common among women. Model 3 shows that stayers in small towns report a lower level of work-family conflict than movers to large cities. For rural municipalities, the coefficient is also negative but not statistically significant. However, the inclusion of the woman*geography interaction term in model 4 reveals that the geographic variation concerns women only. The woman coefficient – now signifying women in large cities – is now positive and statistically significant. Meanwhile, the woman*small town interaction term is negative and statistically significant, and the size of the effect suggests that women in small towns do not perceive a higher level of work-family conflict than men. For rural municipalities, the interaction term does not reach statistical significance, but if small towns and rural municipalities are combined into one group of stayers, the gender gap in work-family conflict is significantly lower in this group than among movers to large cities (results available from authors). Finally, as for wages, a sensitivity analysis showed that the results remained robust after including a control variable to differentiate between return movers and other stayers.

Regarding mechanisms, Model 5 shows that neither career focus nor family focus is significantly correlated with work-family conflict. With a narrower index (described above), the negative coefficient for family focus does reach statistical significance, but regardless of measure, the geographic variation in gender gaps is not affected by our measures of occupational priorities. Model 6 shows that having pre-school children is related to a higher level of work-family conflict; however, the geographic gender patterns remain unchanged until model 7, when work hours are controlled for. Now, the woman*small town interaction term loses statistical significance while the woman coefficient remains statistically significant. Thus, women who remained in small towns keep their level of work-family down relative to both men who remained and women who moved out by working fewer hours. This is also the case if small towns and rural municipalities are combined into one group of stayers (analysis not shown).

Discussion

The study presented above was designed to explore contemporary work-family trade-offs with a focus on the interplay between gender and geography. It addresses two topical issues – gender inequality and rural de-population – and contributes theoretically and empirically to research by integrating different fields of inquiry. Theoretically, the study combines the trade-off hypothesis, arguing that women sacrifice wage and career prospects to make room for caregiving responsibilities, with the notion of regional gender contracts, developed by the Swedish geographer Gunnel Forsberg (1998). Since Forsberg's pioneering work, a large body of geographic gender research has studied living conditions in rural areas, often with qualitative methods (for an overview, see Forsberg, 2024). To date, however, rural-urban patterns in labor market gender inequality have not been sufficiently explored with quantitative data. Meanwhile, the trade-off argument developed in economic/sociological labor market research has not been examined from a geographic perspective.

To address these gaps, we used a survey targeting individuals who grew up in small towns/rural municipalities in Sweden to study how gender gaps in wages on the one hand and work-family conflict on the other varied between individuals who had stayed

in these areas and those who had moved to large cities. The findings clearly indicate that women's work-family trade-offs have a geographic dimension. The analysis shows that the gender gap in monthly wages was significantly larger among stayers in small towns/rural municipalities than among movers. In other words, the wage premium for moving out – or, put differently, the penalty for staying – was larger for women than for men. At the same time, the gender gap in perceived work-family conflict was significantly lower among stayers in small towns/rural areas than among movers to large cities. In summary, the analysis suggests that rural-urban migration involves a trade-off, as women who moved to large cities improved their wage prospects relative to men but paid a price in the form of stress.

To further explore the trade-off argument, essentially based on the assumption that women incorporate future care responsibilities into their choice of occupations and jobs (see e.g. Estevez-Abe, 2006), we also analyzed respondents' initial occupational priorities. The results clearly problematize and nuance this assumption. Using principal component analysis, we found that career and family focus did not represent opposite ends of a one-dimensional scale, and the regression analysis showed that although women prioritized family-friendly work conditions higher than men, they did not value career goals lower. The findings underscore that Swedish women's deliberations on occupational choice reflect a strong commitment to both paid work and family. In contrast, and despite Swedish men's aspiration to a more involved fatherhood (Grunow & Evertsson, 2016), family considerations do not shape the occupational priorities of the male respondents to the same extent. Importantly, however, occupational priorities also vary between geographic contexts, as stayers in small towns/rural municipalities report being more family-focused – but not less career-focused – than movers. This pattern is found among both men and women, but in practice, it is the women who adapt their work involvement. On average, female stayers worked fewer hours than men in the same context, but also compared to women who moved to large cities. In turn, these adaptations explain both the larger gender gap in wages and the smaller gap in work-family conflict among stayers in small towns/rural municipalities. In conclusion – and although relationships in cross-sectional data must be interpreted with caution – the patterns emerging in the analysis are more complex than assumed in dominant theories.

All in all, the study presented above points to the dilemmas facing women in the dual-earner society. While women's aspirations in work and career are as high as men's, they retain the main responsibility for care work and devise strategies to limit work-family conflict. The trade-off hypothesis highlights how these dilemmas can maintain women's labor market disadvantage but presents a simplified and overly traditional description of women's choices. Theories on opportunity structures have long emphasized that choices and life chances are shaped by contextual factors (see, e.g. Roberts, 2009) and gender systems theory emphasizes that gender norms and their implications are contextually variable (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). These insights call for a more intersectional approach that studies patterns both between and within the genders. In this article, we argued that the rural-urban perspective deserves more attention in research on gender inequality, both because geographical inequality has increased and because outmigration from rural areas is dominated by women, and the results underline the relevance of this perspective.

Clearly, the study has several limitations. The sample comprised individuals who grew up in small towns/rural municipalities. As a small minority, this group is invisible in broad surveys but theoretically interesting for understanding rural depopulation. The select sample allowed for a systematic comparison of stayers and movers, but the results are not representative of the working population at large. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, the findings do not allow for causal inferences, and the response rate was relatively low. Thus, it cannot be ruled out that individuals who moved to large cities are positively selected on unobserved characteristics.

Despite these limitations, the analysis presented here highlights the importance of considering geographic dimensions of gender inequality in future research. Here, both quantitative and qualitative studies are needed, ideally from countries with different gender norms and policies. Arguably, the findings of the study could also have more direct policy implications. As several researchers have pointed out, regional policy in Nordic countries needs a more developed gender perspective (Grip, 2020), and the fact that the opportunities for gender equality vary between urban and rural contexts should also be taken into account in family and labor market policies.

Notes

1. It should be noted that researchers discussing women's choice of family-friendly jobs do not argue that choices are unconstrained. Instead, they tend to emphasize that women also foresee statistical discrimination by employers.
2. Work-to-family conflict captures negative spillover in time and strain from work to family, while family-to-work conflict measures how family obligations interfere with work.
3. In Sweden, unlike many other countries, the surplus of men in rural areas has in fact decreased (from a high level); however, this decrease can be attributed to variation in death rates. Meanwhile, women's higher probability to move out from rural areas remains stable and even tends to increase after the 1990s (Karpestam & Håkansson, 2021).
4. In the majority EU countries, the old-age dependency ratio (OADR) – a common indicator of population ageing – is substantially higher in remote rural regions than in metropolitan areas and this is particularly clear in Sweden (Eurostat, 2024; Sánchez Gassen & Heleniak, 2019).
5. More generally, the recruitment pool of highly educated labor is increasingly made up of women, not least in Sweden where 52 percent of the women have university education, compared to 37 percent of the men (Grönlund & Magnusson, 2024).
6. It should be noted that the division of housework and parental leaves in Sweden has become much more equal over the years although women still bear the main responsibility. For example, Swedish fathers share of parental leave days increased from 0.5 percent in 1974 (when parental leave was first introduced) to approximately 30 per cent in 2022 (Försäkringskassan, 2023).
7. Denmark is an exception with a more even dispersion of the population.
8. Growing up in a small town/rural municipality means that they were registered as living there each year from age 7 to age 16 (i.e., through the compulsory school years) in the national population register.
9. The subgroups of Group C are small towns (15,000–39,999 inhabitants); commuter municipalities near small towns; rural municipalities with less than 15,000 inhabitants and very low commuting rates; rural municipalities with a visitor industry. Commuter municipalities are those in which more than 30 percent of the working population commute to work in a small town and those in which more than 30 percent of the employed day population live in another municipality.

10. Here, the four subcategories of Group C (see previous endnote) have been dichotomized into small towns including commuter municipalities nearby and rural municipalities with/without a visitor industry.
11. In Sweden, parents of pre-school children have a statutory right to reduce work hours but this right is mainly utilized by women.

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Appendix

Table A1. Principal component scores for items comprising indexes of career focus and family focus. Principal component analysis.

	Career focus	Family focus
Good initial wages in the occupation	.799	.029
Possibilities for career advancement and/or good wage development in the occupation	.827	.009
Good initial wages in the job	.679	.181
Possibilities for career advancement and/or good wage development in the job	.713	.205
Occupation provides work hours that can be adapted to family/private life	.353	.471
Possibilities to find employment in the place where I wanted to live	.092	.648
The job provides work hours that can be adapted to family/private life	.252	.654
The possibility to live in the place where I wanted to	.005	.797
The job does not require long-distance commuting	.008	.783