

Daily Commuting Time: The Stakes for Working Mothers in France

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The length of daily commuting time between the home and the place of business accentuates the difficulties encountered by salaried mothers in reconciling their professional and familial roles. The majority refuse jobs at too great a distance from their homes. Nevertheless, a study conducted among mothers of children under 16 years of age brings to light two radically different forms of behavior corresponding to two different strategies. In the first case, proximity of employment is an absolute priority and long commuting time an insurmountable obstacle. Among the mothers who adopt this behavioral attitude, many have little formal education and occupy positions requiring few skills; thus much more is at stake in the distance to their place of business because they less often have a car at their disposal for commuting than do other salaried women. In the second case, there is a strategy of greater investment in professional life: full-time work and the acceptance of long commuting time in order to occupy a more skilled position. These salaried mothers are, of course, managers, but also, in not inconsiderable proportions, office workers and skilled workers. For working mothers, maneuverability in time management is also determined by the urban context. Salaried mothers put more time into commuting in the metropolitan Paris area than in the provinces. In return, they have access to a larger range of jobs served by an elaborate network of public transportation. Primary and secondary teachers seem to benefit from the best working conditions: they often work close to home and declare much more frequently than do other working mothers that they have some free time.

There has been a dramatic increase in the female labor force in France since World War II and especially since 1962. This growth was essentially due to the increasing percentage of married women working outside the home: for example, the rate of economically active women aged 30 to 34, living conjugally with a man, and having two children rose from 27 percent in 1962 to 65 percent in 1982 and from 13 to 32 percent for those having three children. In addition, 8 of every 10 working women are salaried employees. It may be implied that the place of residence is spatially dissociated from the work place and that working mothers consequently face strong pressures on their time. As many studies conducted in different places at different times and the author's prior research have shown (1-6), married women tend to be much more preoccupied than men with working close to their home and having shorter journeys to work. As a matter of fact, analyses of the activity patterns and time-scheduling studies of women and men have demonstrated that the tenacity of traditional sex roles and the need to reconcile the demands of work with those of

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family life require working mothers to devise coping strategies that may include reducing their travel time. Even if the husband contributes some time to household chores, as is often the case in the "new middle classes," and even if the wife is relieved of some of the physical burden of housework, the responsibility of the home remains essentially hers (7). Therefore, it is proposed here to focus on the commuting time of working mothers in France in relation to some other aspects of their daily life and to analyze the effect of the journey to work on their strategies for reconciling their professional and family commitments.

METHODOLOGY AND HYPOTHESES

The data used were from a survey conducted in 1981 by the Institut National des Etudes Démographiques and by the Centre d'Etudes et des Coûts among a representative national sample of all mothers having at least one child under 16 years of age at the time of the survey ($n = 3,935$). Of these, those who held salaried employment ($n = 1,827$; 46 percent) outside their home were selected. Because the question, as posed, asked women to estimate their (one-way) commute times, some of the answers may of course contain an element of subjectivity, tending to overestimate when this trip was "stressful." On the contrary, others may underevaluate this time in order to rationalize their choices a posteriori.

In addition, there is a lack of information about women's job opportunities near the place of residence. The questionnaire was not elaborated in order to specifically study travel to work. The relationships between the residential choice of household and the place of the mother's job are not known. In fact, as recent data on the metropolitan Paris area (MPA) suggest, families may try to live close to the woman's work place in order to facilitate her reconciliation of household responsibilities with a job. In the MPA, the residential patterns of households in which both parents work are different from those in which only the husband works. The former are much more frequently located in or near the urban center (where half of the metropolitan women's jobs are concentrated). In the suburbs, where there is a lack of women's jobs, noneconomically active married women are overrepresented. In this study, the focus is on some factors affecting mothers' work-trip times and their impact on some aspects of their daily life.

The background of this study takes into account that spatial organizational characteristics, particularly in metropolitan areas, are not especially adapted to working mothers, torn—in time and space—between their place of residence and their job location. The spatial division of work and the "functional

specialization" of the different parts of suburbs magnify the difficulties encountered by women in combining family life with a job.

But it is hypothesized that if time is a critical factor in job choices for mothers who are unskilled or poorly educated, it constitutes a less important stake for mothers who are highly educated and privileged.

Reluctance of Working Mothers to Work Far Away from Home

Half the mothers working outside the home commute for less than a quarter of an hour (one way), whereas only about one-third of the total working population spends this amount of commute time (8). The last census also showed that female employees having at least one child under 14 spend 3 hr 15 min in commuting each week compared with 4 hr 5 min for women employees without any children under 14, and 4 hr 45 min for men employees (9).

These data reflect the reluctance of many mothers to work far away from their residence. As Maurice and Delomenie (10) observed in their study on women married to blue-collar workers in Marseilles, mothers preferred to take any kind of job near their residence rather than commute farther away to get a better-paid and higher-status job.

However, travel time among working mothers varies according to miscellaneous variables, as will be seen.

Influence of Urban Size on Travel Time

Working mothers living in small and middle-sized towns have the shortest trip times: 64 percent spend less than 15 min commuting compared with 50 percent for the whole sample. At the opposite end of the scale, those living in the MPA have the longest trip times: almost half (48 percent) of the journeys to work take 25 min or more and one-third, 40 min or more. This phenomenon is explained by the greater reliance on public transportation; the scarcity of parking opportunities in the central areas where 75 percent of the women's jobs in the MPA are located; the long journey-to-work distances, which in part reflect the spatial distribution of women's employment opportunities vis-à-vis their spatial distribution of residences; and the overrepresentation of women in management and as skilled office workers (27.5 percent of working mothers in the MPA are in high- or middle-level management compared with 15.9 percent of those living in the rest of France).

As a matter of fact, middle- and high-level management, other professionals, and office workers have the longest trip times almost everywhere, partly as a result of their concentration in the centers of the service- and office-related occupations. However, the urban patterns of the MPA accentuate the differences between the occupational categories. The time and spatial constraints here are so strong that this could explain in part why the rate of employment among married women decreases with the distance into the suburbs (11).

Teachers (primary, secondary, and college) are especially favored. They tend to work close to home, even in the MPA (51 percent are less than 15 min from their home compared with 38 percent for management and other professionals), thanks to the equal spatial distribution of educational institutions.

Travel Time to Work Reduced as Number of Children Increases

The average travel time regularly decreases when the number of children increases in the MPA as well as in the provinces (asterisk indicates data not significantly different at 5 percent):

No. of Children	Travel Time (min) by Residence	
	MPA	Provinces
1	31.2	16.1*
2	26.3	15.1*
3 or more	24.4	12.6

These data corroborate those of the 1982 census (12). The proportion of married women who work in their own residential neighborhood regularly increases with the number of children. But the categories "unskilled manual workers" and "service workers" are much more susceptible to travel time: 63 percent spend less than 15 min commuting when they have three children or more compared with 51 percent for those who have only one child. On the other hand, the number of children does not have any significant effect on the travel times of management, other professionals, and office workers.

When level of education is taken into account, a distinction can be observed between uneducated or poorly educated mothers and highly educated mothers (i.e., with or without a high-school diploma). (In order to have sufficient numbers in each sample, a distinction was feasible only between low and high educational levels.) For the poorly educated, the percentage of long travel times (more than 25 min) decreases as soon as there are two children in the family, whereas for highly educated mothers, this percentage decreases only when there are two to three children. For the mothers living outside of the MPA, the same phenomenon can be observed (Table 1).

TABLE 1 AVERAGE TRAVEL TIME ACCORDING TO NUMBER OF CHILDREN AND LEVEL OF EDUCATION

No. of Children	Poorly Educated ^a	Highly Educated ^b
Whole Sample		
1	18.1	19.5
2	16.7	19.3
3	13.7 ^c	15.4 ^c
Mothers Living in Provinces		
1	16.1 ^c	16.4
2	14.3 ^c	17.2
3	11.9 ^c	14.5

^aNo high school diploma.

^bHigh school diploma or more.

^cSignificantly different at 5 percent.

Therefore, the benefits obtained by a profitable and socially valued job seem to compensate for the disadvantages of long travel times. Within the MPA, for example, management and other professionals who assume responsibility for others (33 percent) have significantly longer travel times than those who do not have this responsibility (65 percent compared with 47 percent). The same distinction is found between office workers who have many promotion opportunities and those who do not (60 percent compared with 46 percent).

On the other hand, mothers who are poorly educated or unskilled seem all the more reluctant to work far away from their home because the additional incentives are insufficient (13). In addition, they devote much more time to their household responsibilities than do the more privileged mothers and do not benefit from paid household help (14). Moreover, their access to the labor market is all the more spatially restricted because they also less frequently have access to a car than do the mothers with more education and skills, as will now be seen.

Travel to Work and Means of Transportation

Almost 6 of every 10 working mothers (58 percent) use a car (as a driver or as a passenger) to commute. Only 15 percent use public transportation. Service and unskilled manual workers rely greatly on foot travel, bicycles, mopeds, or a bus service offered by their employer. The data in Table 2 reveal that, concerning two-car households and access to a car (as a driver or as a passenger), these occupational categories are the most penalized, because the use of a car allows the reduction of travel time and the enlarging of job opportunities.

TABLE 2 DISTRIBUTION OF MOTHERS COMMUTING BY CAR ACCORDING TO OCCUPATIONAL STATUS

Occupation	Living in Two-Car Household (%)	Commuting by Car (%)
Teacher	55	70
Management	47	69
Office worker	42	64
Sales worker	37	62
Blue collar		
Skilled	30	63
Unskilled	24	44
Service worker	25	31
Total	38	58

Of course, in the MPA, as a result of their greater reliance on public transportation (44 percent compared with only 10 percent in the rest of France), all working mothers have much longer travel times (75 percent of the work trips made by public transportation last more than 20 min). The diverse professional advantages that Parisians may have are often offset by long commute times and their consequences on the worker's remaining time.

Daily Life and Travel Times

In coping with the problems of time and spatial constraints, working mothers elaborate different compromises, depending on many factors. One-fourth of the mothers in high- and middle-level management and office workers work full time (39 hr or more a week) and spend at least 1 hr every day commuting, whereas only 12 percent of the service workers and the unskilled manual workers do so. A part-time job is a more and more frequent solution for working mothers, especially those for whom family responsibilities still take precedence. For example, part-time jobs are much more frequent among unskilled manual workers than among management or other professionals (20 percent compared with only 14 percent) and are

more often associated with short travel times. This phenomenon reflects the priority given by most of the poorly educated women to their family responsibilities over their work obligations, more especially because they often have no career prospects and earn low wages.

The number of meals (mid-day and evening) eaten at home during the working day according to occupational status confirms the heterogeneity of attitudes toward family life and brings to light different forms of behavior concerning different obligations. Of course, eating at home both at mid-day and in the evening is strongly correlated with short work trips; 69 percent of mothers working 15 min or less from their residence eat all their meals at home compared with 48 percent for the whole sample; conversely, when they have long commuting times, 78 percent of the working mothers eat at home only in the morning and evening. However, for mothers working less than a quarter of an hour from their residence (half the sample), significant differences can be observed according to occupational status. Only 48 percent of management and other professional personnel take advantage of the proximity to work to have lunch at home compared with 81 percent for sales workers and 73 percent for service and unskilled manual workers. Skilled blue-collar workers and office workers occupy an intermediate position.

Free Time and Working Conditions

It was possible to see the influence of some working conditions on the perception of free time. Mothers were asked, "Do you think that you have enough free time during the week to rest or to entertain?"

The perception of free time and the requirement for it vary naturally according to different sociocultural factors. Women attached to traditional values, who give priority to their roles of mother and spouse and are often poorly educated, may put in the same category free time and the time spent to take care of their children or simply the time spent at home. For example, among mothers who are service workers, 78 percent of those who claim to have free time have both mid-day and evening meals at home during the week compared with only 40 percent of management personnel.

For highly educated and career-oriented women, free time is more frequently associated with autonomous activities: "modernist" values govern their attitudes and it seems as if the more privileged they are, the harder it is for them to be satisfied with their free time. Even if, objectively, they enjoy more time for their personal activities, thanks to their material conditions, they are more likely to give a negative answer to the question of whether they have free time. Consequently, even when they assume the same professional constraints as those of other working mothers, they claim less often to have free time than do mothers in other occupational categories, as Table 3 shows. For example, only 10 percent of mothers in management and other professions who work full time and have long commute times claim to have free time compared with 22 percent for unskilled blue-collar workers and 16 percent for office workers under the same conditions.

However, whatever occupational category is considered, the longer the work day, the more often these workers claim to have no free time at their disposal. Travel time also has a

TABLE 3 PERCEPTION OF FREE TIME BY OCCUPATION, NUMBER OF HOURS WORKED, AND LENGTH OF COMMUTE

Work and Commute Time	Percentage of Responses by Occupation ^a															
	Teacher				Management				Office Worker		Sales Worker		Blue-Collar			
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Skilled	Unskilled		Service Worker		
											Yes	No	Yes	No		
Whole group	45	55	27	73	24	76	38	62	19	81	33	67	45	55		
Work part time (30 hr or less)	45	55	65	35	68	32	82	18	n.s.	n.s.	59	41	73	27		
Work full time with short travel time (<15 min)	<i>-b</i>	—	25	75	17	83	19	81	23	77	29	71	37	63		
Work full time with long travel time (>25 min)	—	—	10	90	16	84	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.	22	78	n.s.	n.s.		

NOTE: n.s. = not significant because the numbers are too small.

^aMothers were asked, "Do you think that you have enough free time to rest or to entertain during the week?"

^bTeachers are all considered part-time workers.

statistically significant influence on the perception of free time: among mothers who have a full-time job, those spending more than 25 min traveling to work claim less frequently to have free time than those having short travel times (14 percent compared with 25 percent).

Surprisingly, the number of children is not a discriminating factor for the answers on free time: 23 percent of mothers who have one child claim to have some free time compared with 16 percent of those who have three children.

Teachers, who benefit from the most convenient working conditions, also claim much more frequently than any other category to have free time (45 percent compared with 32 percent for the whole sample). In addition, a substantial proportion participate in a number of associations (26 percent compared with 10 percent for management and other professionals and only 6 percent for other working mothers).

These miscellaneous advantages and the consequent relative facility in reconciling their professional and familial roles may partly explain the attractiveness of teaching jobs for educated women and the increasing number of women teachers (especially in elementary and secondary schools).

CONCLUSION

Therefore, beyond the different strategies developed by working mothers to cope with the difficulties of daily life and to overcome the time and spatial constraints, one can say that their choices are determined not only by economic and social factors but also by urban characteristics. These characteristics appear not to be adapted to the specific needs of working mothers and especially not to those of the less-privileged group: the spatial distribution of work and the scarcity of mixed land use exacerbate the conflicts between family and professional life and tend to penalize women, especially if they have no car. Moreover, as a result of the demographic segregation in French urban areas, mothers are more likely to live in the outlying suburbs than women living alone or without children (11).

Consequently, it may be seen that they often face difficult choices concerning their job; they are often obliged to accept

long commute times in order to hold a job corresponding to their qualifications and requirements, which is frequently the case with career-oriented women. The higher women are in the sociooccupational hierarchy, the more readily they accept the time commitment to commuting and the freer they seem from the constraint of working as close as possible to home. At the lower end of the hierarchy, women accept whatever jobs are available near their residence because long commuting time is an insurmountable obstacle, and consequently their job choices are restricted, all the more so if they have no car at their disposal. Among these latter, many have little formal education and occupy positions requiring few skills. The lower they are in the sociooccupational hierarchy, the more difficulties they have in facing the time and spatial constraints, especially if they have two or more children. But the more privileged mothers face a strong time squeeze and often complain about the "double day burden." However, strong support was found for the hypothesis that trip time is a much more important consideration for poorly educated mothers than for highly educated mothers.

In conclusion, if it is assumed that the participatory revolution has essentially been a change in labor-force participation of wives and mothers and that young mothers are more and more willing or obliged to work outside the home, or both, one could hypothesize that the difficulties linked to spatial characteristics could, in part and indirectly, explain the declining fertility rate in France since 1965 and especially the increasing number of women refusing to have a third child.

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