

First Births: A comparative study of the patterns of transition to parenthood in Europe

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This article compares the transition to parenthood in 12 European countries. What are the socio-economic and demographic circumstances where women have their first child? Are there connections between fertility and family policy models? We assume that in the strong family policy countries the difference in the patterns of having a first birth is smaller between high educated and low educated mothers than in those countries with lower family benefits. This indicates that generous family policy package would make it easier to combine education, work and family life Our second hypothesis is that all over Europe economic uncertainty has impacts on childbearing decisions. For example women in/with higher education attempt more easily to postpone their first births for 'investment for future' reasons than other women.

We use European Community Household Panel Survey -data of 12 countries from the year 1997 to 2001. The countries studied are Denmark, Finland, Sweden (only in some charts), Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, Belgium, France, Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain. From the data we discard households with no women aged 18-46. So we focus our study to women at the best fertile age.

The results reveal that postponed first births are not automatically connected to low numbers of completed births. For example in the Nordic countries the proportion of mothers at age category 18-25 is very low, but the proportion of mothers and the average number of children at age category 36-46 is relatively high. Our results witness that first births and marriage are still strongly interrelated in European countries. In Southern European countries it still seems to be a norm to be married at the time of first conception. In the Nordic countries marriage increase the likelihood of first birth, but is not a norm.

Our results indicate that favourable living conditions generally increase the likelihood to transit to parenthood. When we studied childless 18-40 year old women the ones who had their first birth were more likely not to be living in poverty, to be home owners and to be living in spacious dwellings. In this respect there was no major difference between countries. It seems that investments in family policies work simultaneously for family welfare and higher fertility.