First Births: A comparative study of the patterns of transition to parenthood in Europe[1]

Katja Forssén & Veli-Matti Ritakallio

University of Turku

Finland

Introduction

Fertility has been one of the oldest issues in population policies all around the world. Governments are not generally interested in the number of children families have, but are deeply concerned that population neither increases so rapidly that it is a drain on a nation's resource base nor declines so precipitously that it imperils national viability. (Castles 1999.) These population problems have varied between time and between development levels of nations. For example in the 1930s all over the Europe the demographic prospects were alarming. Fertility was high among population groups with weak economic status, but not among the better-off. During that time Alva and Gunnar Myrdal published their pro-natalist book 'Crisis in the Population Question'. In the book the Myrdals (1934) acknowledged the right of women to combine paid employment and child-rearing. They announced that *every child should have the right to be born wanted*. The new aim of population policy was to encourage all families to have children.

Since the 1980s fertility has once again fallen to below replacement level in most western countries. Unbalanced age structures threaten the sustainability of national

[1] Paper to be presented at EPUNET meeting in Barcelona at 9th of May 2006

economies in the longer run. However, paradoxically, nowadays many parents independently of social status wish to have more children than they actually have (Hoem & Hoem 1989; Eurobarometer 1990). Nevertheless, socio-economic conditions make them to postpone first births and restrict the total number of children. Today's version of Myrdals' announcement could be that *every wanted child should have the right to be born*.

In the literature one of the key explanations for the fall in fertility is that first births have increasingly been postponed thereby shortening women's total childbearing years and increasing their risk of childlessness (Castles 1999). The average age at first birth is now almost 30 in Europe. As explanations for the increasing age at first births the extended educational attainment and increased female labour force participation of women has been presented. For this reason the policies to support female labour force participation has been recognized as one key factor to reach favourable fertility level (Esping-Andersen 1998).

From the point of view of fertility as well as of well-being of families it is important to know in what circumstances women are when they start their family life and how transition to parenthood varies between countries and between different social policy models. Comparative micro-data based research on the circumstances in which women decide to have their first child is almost nonexistent. This article aims to fill that gap.

The aim of our article is to compare cross-nationally the socio-economic circumstances in which women have their first birth in Europe. Our analyses are

mainly based on micro level data. The structure of the chapter is the following. We first present some theoretical views on factors that have been linked to fertility. Then we introduce our data and basic concepts that are used in the study. Thereafter we analyse the correlation of educational attainment and childlessness in different countries. After that we compare the relationship between age at first birth and the total number of women having children when they are in their 40s. Finally we present our empirical findings of the role of living conditions as predictor of having first birth. We study living conditions (cohabitation and marriage, labour force status, economic situation and housing conditions) of women about one year before they had their first births and we will compare that group to the childless group of women in the same age category. The major interest is to test if the between country differences are in accordance with family policy models so that Nordic countries, Central European countries and Mediterranean countries tend to group separately.

Theoretical background

The classical account of the determinants of fertility behaviour is to be found in demographic transition theory, which links the decline of fertility to the process of socio-economic modernization. The theory suggests that the forces of modernization lead to a reduction in disease and mortality, making it possible for families to reduce their fertility without any decline in the number of children until maturity. According to the theory economic development, changing occupational structure and education impact on fertility. (Coale & Watkins 1986.) It can be argued that demographic transition theory does not provide enough tools for explaining more detailed fertility

changes and postponement of first births that have been taken place in many Western countries in the post-modern era. Because of changes in family dynamics, contraception and value orientation, the fertility decline is interpreted as one of the manifestations of the second demographic transition from the 1960s onward (Vikat 2002). Women were able to choose more freely what to do with their lives including timing or type of family formation and labour force participation. The concept of new social risks has been introduced to describe recent changes in welfare states. New social risks arise from shifts in the balance of work and family as a direct result of the declining importance of the male breadwinner family and changes in the labour market. (Taylor-Gooby 2004.)

Transition to parenthood is dependent on individual and household-based decisions. Success or failure in the labour market, as well as living standards are important in these decisions. Woman's fertility behaviour is determined by her capacity to find ways of combining work and maternity, with a default option being to work without having children or to delay fertility until such time as these priorities can be better reconciled. According to earlier research the main factors that effect women’s fertility behaviour are education, socio-economic situation, conditions in labour market and generosity of family policy support. (Hoem & Hoem 1989.)

Many demographic studies conclude that the major reason for the growing postponement of parenthood has been women's growing educational attainment. For example in the United States the probability of having a first birth among women aged 20-24 have been five time greater for those who have not completed high school than for those with a college education (Rind 1991). The educational level of women

has been increasing in most countries during the past few decades and this trend is associated on declined fertility rates. There are several explanations of how education is connected to the postponement of first births. It might delay parenthood because many women believe that roles of mother and student are incompatible. Education may influence first birth timing via occupation. According to Edwards (2002) women may choose to attend education with an investment orientation. Women may be confident that spending time in education will create greater occupational opportunities whatever their anticipated timing of first birth. (Edwards 2002.)

Delays in childbearing are in recent decades also seen as a consequence of increased female labour force participation and the difficulties to combine childbearing with work. Most studies of the relationship between women's labour force participation and fertility consider in some form the micro-economic rational choice theory of the New Home Economics that links childbearing probabilities to the levels of direct and opportunity costs of childbearing. It assumes that an incompatibility exists between labour force participation and motherhood (Becker 1993). The main mechanisms are price-of-time effect and the income effect. The price of time effect implies that childbearing incurs opportunity costs in the form of foregone income and human capital accumulation, while the income effect implies that higher earnings help the couple to cope with the direct costs of childbearing. According to this theoretical framework it could be assumed that households with better economic status have it easier to transit to parenthood and this should be shown in the statistics. On the other hand in the generous family policy countries the gap between well-off households and low-income households should be smaller than in countries without universal benefit system.

According to Esping-Andersen (1998), family policy measures not only contribute to the well being of children, but they also have a much wider societal impact, as far as population policy and gender equality are concerned. Esping-Andersen claims that undeveloped family policy will, sooner or later, be reflected in birthrates and population structures. He argues that many welfare states have not been able to advance their family policies to respond to the increasing demands of equality. The changed status of women is the most essential of these demands. In the Western countries, women expect to be treated equally with men, especially in terms of participation in working life and family maintenance. Family policy can lend support to these expectations, especially through daycare arrangements for children. (Esping-Andersen 1998.)

The aim

This chapter compares the transition to parenthood in 12 European countries. The study integrates aspects of economic and sociological theories of family building and childbearing behaviours. What are the socio-economic and demographic circumstances where women have their first child? How does this pattern to parenthood vary between European countries? Are there connections between fertility and family policy models? According to the theories discussed above we can make some hypothesis how the pattern of having a first birth differs between countries that represent different welfare states and between women that are in different socio-economic situations. 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: women in/with higher education attempt more easily to postpone their first births for 'investment for future' reasons than other women and unemployed women or women with insecure work contracts attempt to postpone their first births. In line with this permanent job of mother should correlate positively with first births, poverty should correlate negatively with first births and guaranteed housing tenure (owning) as well as housing space (single-family house or detached or semi-detached or terraced house) should correlate positively with first births.

The data

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

In the ECHP data it is possible to identify directly only children under 16 living in the household. When analysing the total number of children among at maximum 46-year-old women we added to the analysis the adults (over 16 year olds) who were 16 to 24

years younger than the mother. There is a possibility that in some cases this procedure introduces inaccuracy by adding a household member who is not a family member.

ECHP data contain per year approximately 1500 households with newborn babies. This is too few to allow detailed comparative study. Besides, not all of them are first babies in the family. We focus only on first birth cases. To obtain enough of them we pooled 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2001 first birth cases together. In that way we obtained altogether 3161 cases. We mainly analysed their circumstances one year before the year they had the first birth. As in case of those who had a first birth at 2001, we studied their socio-economic circumstances at 2000 when they were close to conception. Our comparison group was 18-40 years old women with no children at 2001 (n=6262).

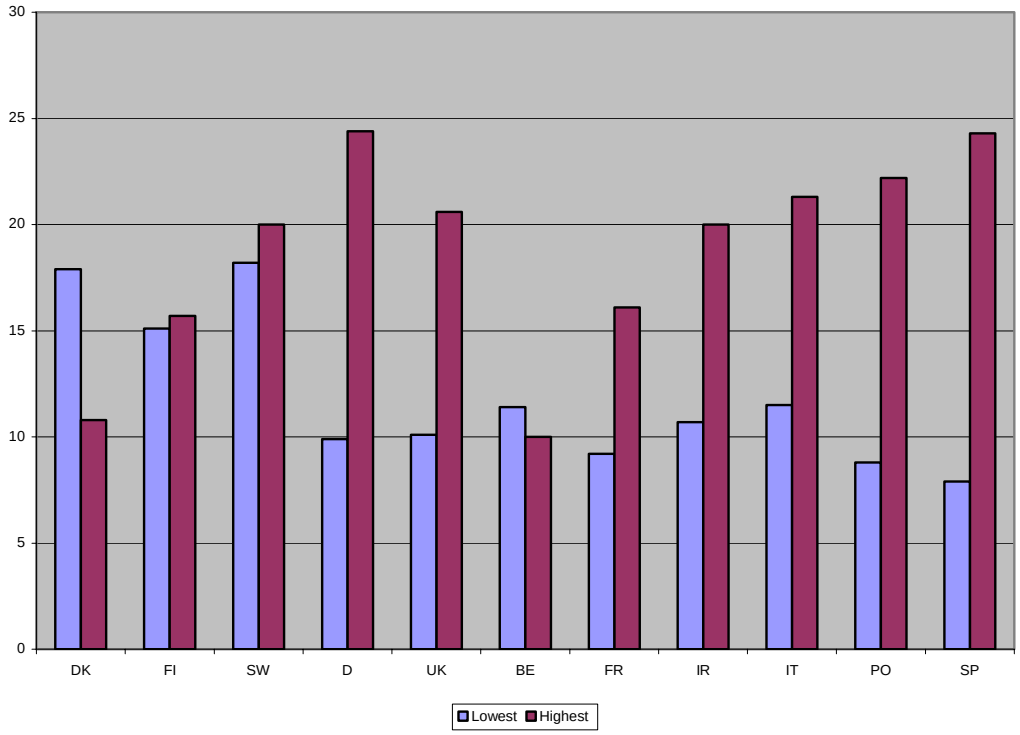
In some analyses we focus on 36-46 years women at 2001. Here the idea was to achieve a deeper understanding of completed fertility. What is the proportion of permanently childless women and how do these women differ from women with children at the same age category? The number of childless 26-46 years women was 2072 and number of women with children at the same age category was 8593.

Educational attainment

The educational level of women has been increasing in most countries during the past few decades. During the same period fertility rates have also declined. The main theoretical explanations assume that the longer the time spent in education the longer

first births are postponed thereby shortening women's total childbearing years and increase their chances of childlessness. On the bases of this we could hypothesize that at the cross-section 2001 in all the countries the proportions of childless women in age category 36-40 years would be higher among highly educated women than women with relatively short educational career. In Chart 1 we examine this.

Chart 1. Proportion of women having no children at 36-40 years according to educational status (lowest= ISCED 0-2 vs. highest=third level ISCED 5-7)



There indeed is a general tendency that higher educated women are more likely to be childless than lower educated women. This is particularly true in Mediterranean countries, in Central European countries and in Ireland and the UK. The exceptions

are the Nordic countries and Belgium. There childlessness is not strongly associated with poor female education, as the general theory propose. In the Nordic countries, unlike other countries, the completed fertility of highly educated women at age 36-40 is about the same as among low educated women. The Nordic countries prove that high fertility and high female education are not alternatives, but instead can be reconciled. The important population policy issue is, why in the Nordic countries is high education not a barrier against motherhood, as it is in other countries?

The above presented differences in fertility between different education categories. Chart 2 presents the proportions of highly educated women in age category 36-46.

Chart 2. Proportion of women having high (third level, ISCED 5-7) educational status at 36-46 years

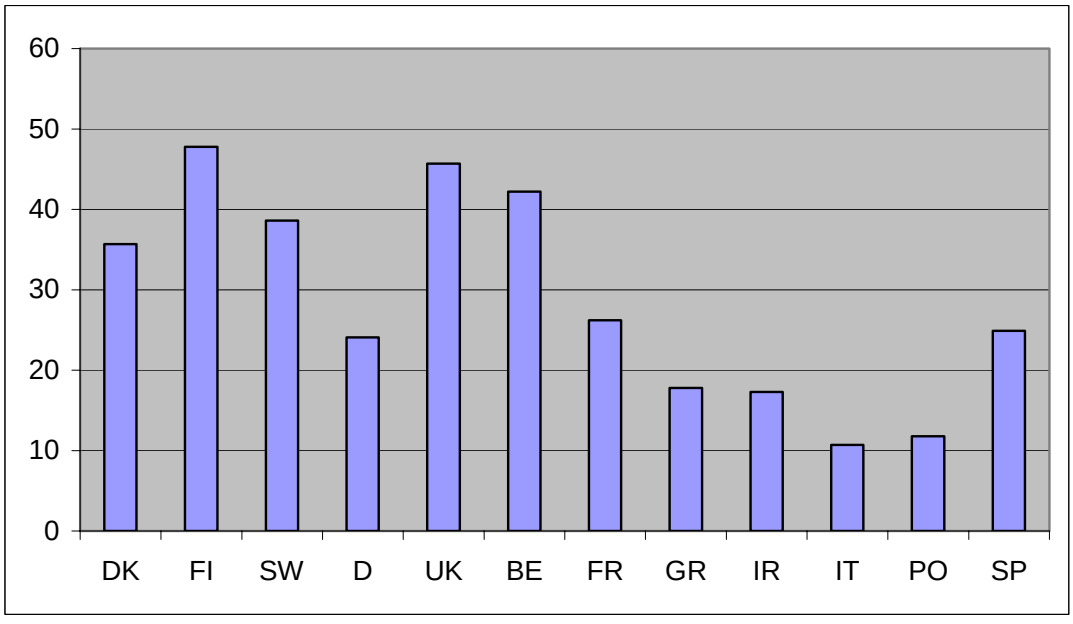
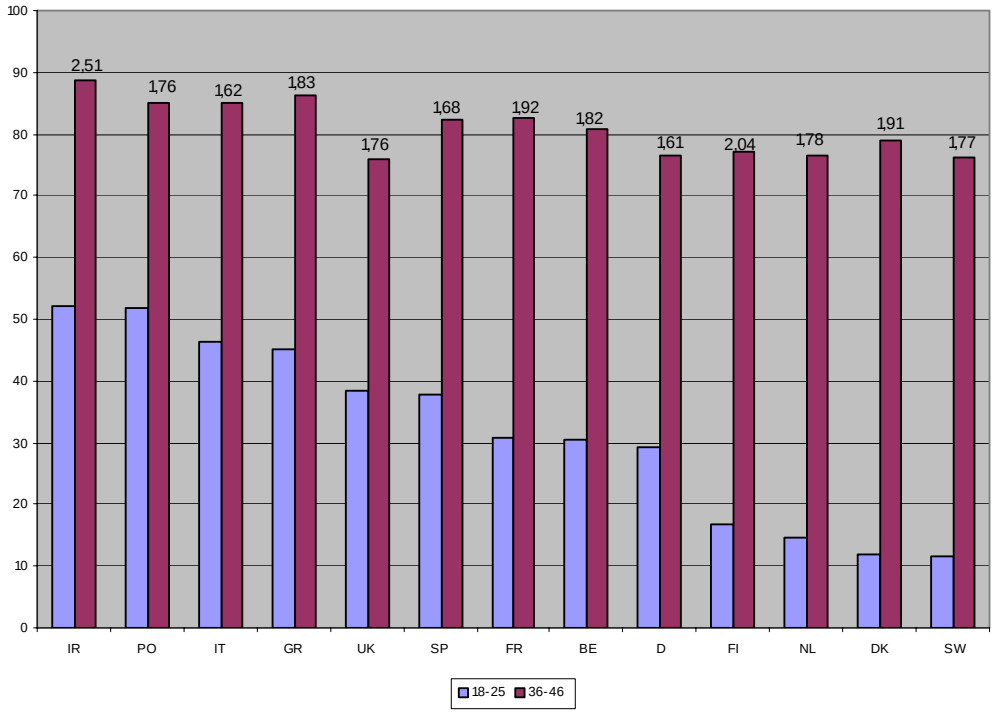


Chart 2 shows that there exists a big difference in educational structures between countries. The fertility of highly educated women is important population policy issue particularly for Nordic countries and in the UK and in Belgium simply because in these countries the proportion of highly educated women is high.

Of the Chart 3 we see that first birth patterns by age are very different in European countries, but in a final stage there is no big difference in the proportion of women having children at age of 36-46.

Chart 3. Proportion of women having children at 18-25 years and at 36-46 years, % (on the top of the red bars is presented the average number of children among women at age 36-46)



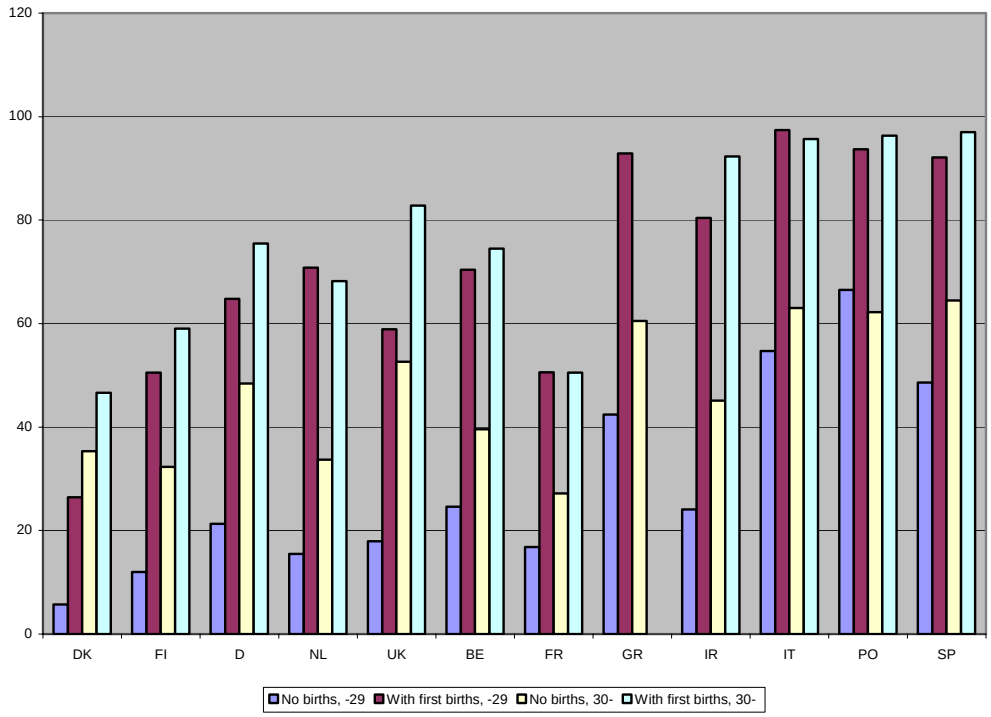
In Ireland, in the Mediterranean countries and in the UK more than one in three women at age category 18-25 years women have already given their first birth. In the Nordic countries and in the Netherlands the pattern is rather different. Less than one fifth of the women at age category 18-25 years have children. To understand better the between country differences in fertility, it is not enough to focus on the age of mothers at their first birth and on the female educational attainment, as well as on the completed proportions of childless women. We also have to take into consideration the number of children of those who have children. According to Chart 6 the average number of children among women at 36-46 years does not correlate with the proportion of women having given birth before they are 25. In Ireland the proportion of mothers at age category 18-25 is the highest and as well there is the highest average fertility and the smallest proportion of childless women. However, after Ireland follow two Nordic countries, Finland and Denmark. Their proportion of young mothers is small, but completed average number of children is relatively high. The small average numbers of children among 36-46 years women is not explained by the extended female educational attainment and attached postponements of first births and childlessness. There have to be other reasons, which explain the differences in fertility behaviour. In the following we focus on socio-demographic circumstances prior the first births. Using age standardized analysis we focus on 18-40 years women without children. Our aim is to study if the characteristics of first birth mothers deviate from childless women and to compare if there is variation between countries in this respect. Does permanent labour force activity guaranteed subsistence and housing conditions as well as cohabitation status differ between women who give their first birth and who do not? Our hypothesis is that favourable conditions increase the likelihood to obtain children. If our data support this argument the logical way to maintain fertility is to

support young adults financially, and support them to get permanent jobs and to improve their housing conditions. We start with a comparison of marital and cohabitation status of first birth mothers.

Cohabitation and marriage

Here we assess the extent to which different processes of partnership formation have an impact on entering parenthood. At the beginning of the 1970s the norm in most European countries was to start a union with marriage. It seems in Chart 4 that first births and marriage are strongly interrelated in Southern European countries even nowadays. In the Nordic countries marriage and first birth appear not to be interrelated as strongly. However also in these countries marriage increases the likelihood of first births, but particularly in Denmark marriage seems not to be a precondition of children. Only one quarter of 18-29 years first birth mothers were married one year prior to the birth and less than half at the older age category. The French pattern is pretty similar to the Finnish one: about half of the first birth mothers were married one year before the birth.

Chart 4. Proportion of married women with and without first births by two age groups.

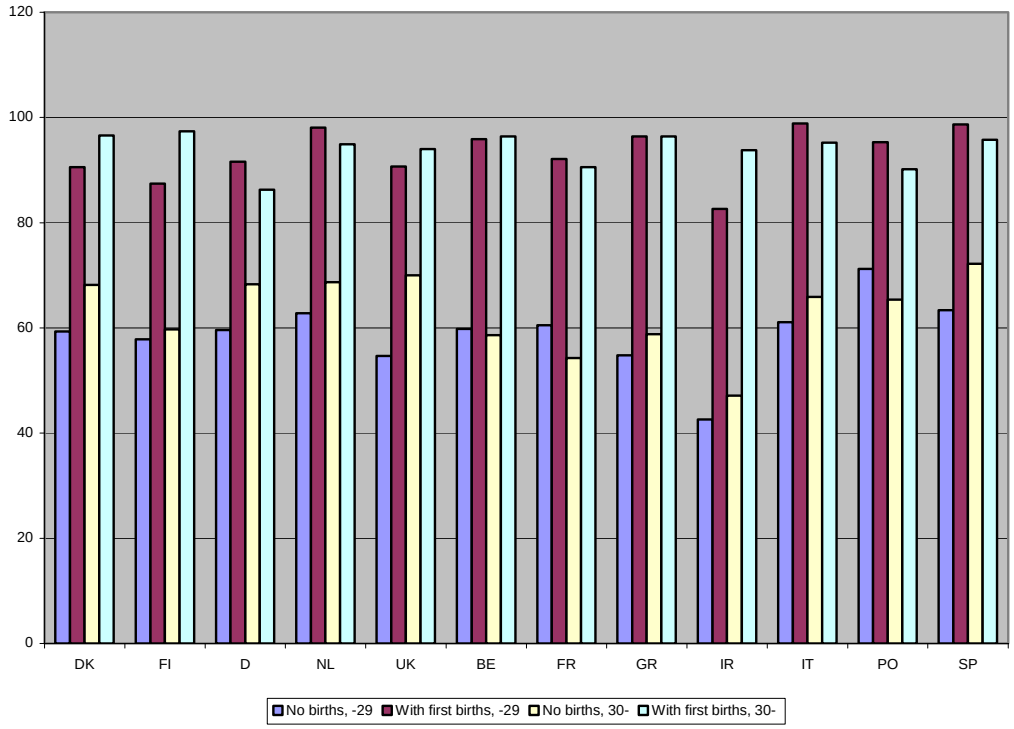


One important dimension of the interrelationship between first birth and first union is the impact of values, attitudes and intentions towards family life. Unfortunately ECHP-dataset does not have any questions concerning family values. On the other hand Southern countries are still commonly labelled as traditional, Catholic and family oriented and Chart 7 confirms that in these countries majority of women entering to motherhood are married.

Marriage and cohabitation are today two parallel forms of union living. Cohabitation has become increasingly common in Europe. Although marriage has a weaker link to first birth especially in the Nordic countries than in Southern European countries, all

countries share the same cohabitation pattern. In Chart 5 it can be seen that first births at both age groups are very strongly interrelated to cohabitation status.

Chart 5. Proportion of cohabiting (including married) women with and without first births by two age groups, %

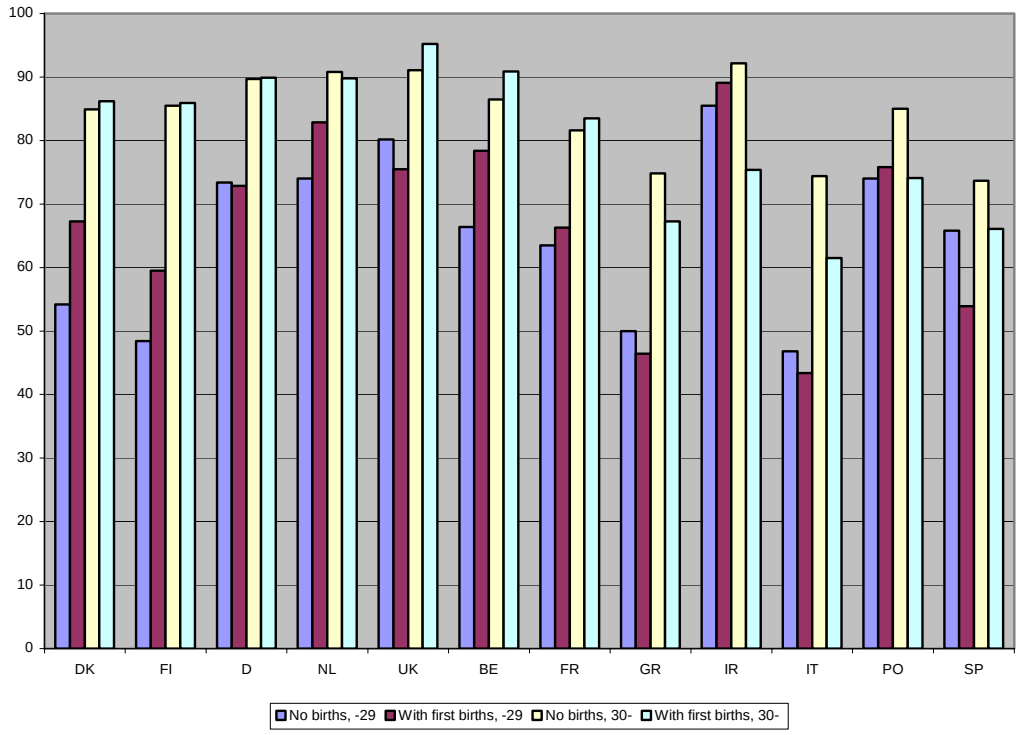


Labour force status

Chart 6 shows that in all the countries majority of women are working at the time of conception. Generally there is a positive relationship between first births and activity in labour market. However the relationship is not very strong and there exist some exceptions. Particularly, Mediterranean countries seem to deviate from this pattern. Germany and the UK also have lower employment rates for first births of younger

women but these differences are not statistically significant. There the proportion of employees is typically higher among childless women than among first births givers at the time of conception.

Chart 6. Activity rates in labour market, 18-29 years and at 30-40 years women without children vs. women with first birth, %



McDonald (2000) argues that two distinct fertility scenarios are possible in countries that provide women with substantial opportunities in labour market. In countries in which it is possible to blend employment and childbearing without major losses in labour market status and earnings, many women will choose both paid work and parenting. In those countries in which it is more difficult to combine motherhood and employment, because of traditional family values combined with weak family

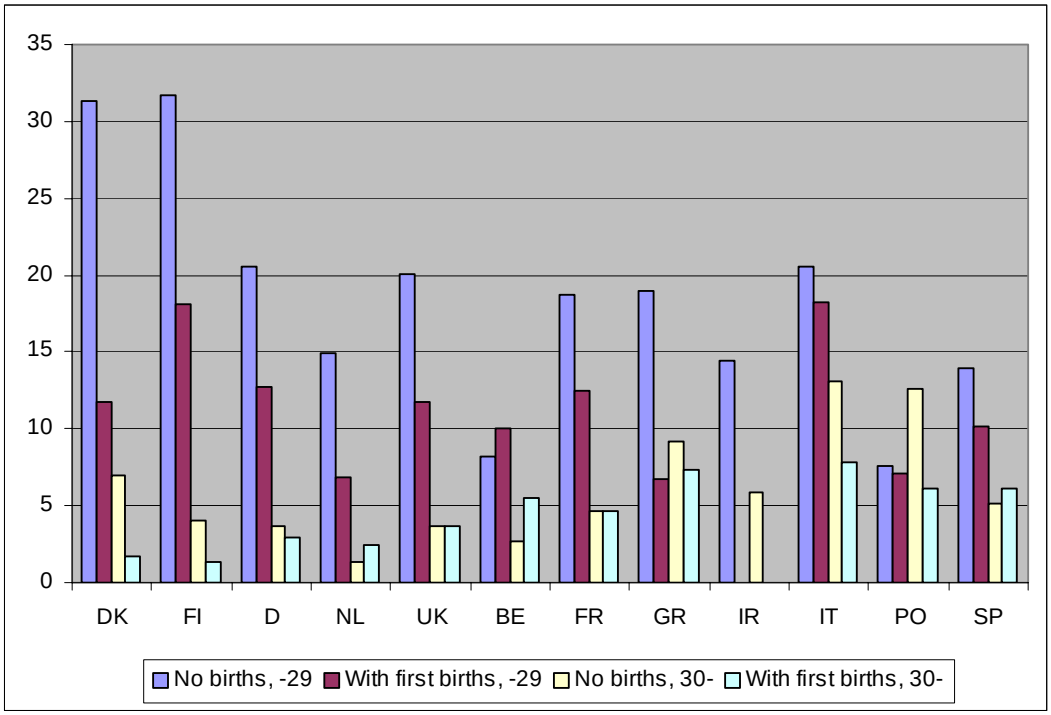
policies, large number of women will forgo childbearing. (Gornick & Meyers 2003.) Chart 6 shows that this trend exists when concentrating on women's labour market status. Low fertility rates in Mediterranean welfare states can be explained by women's difficulty in balancing the roles of informal carer and paid worker. As Taylor-Gooby (2004) argues in the post-industrial society there is increasing demand from women for greater equality in access to education and to independent employment. New social risks emerge most acutely for lower skilled women who find most difficulty in balancing work and family, especially in conservative and Southern European countries. (Taylor-Gooby 2004.)

Economic situation

To test the hypothesis that the economic situation influences the decisions to transit into parenthood we study poverty, home owning and the kind of accommodation. Are there any differences between countries and between first birth mothers and age standardized childless women.

To study poverty we use the mainstream income based methodology (see also Chapter 13). The poverty line is set nationally to 60 per cent of median incomes and uses the original OECD equivalence scale.

Chart 7: Proportion of income poor (60 % of national median) at 18-29 years and at 30-40 years, women without children vs. women with first birth, %



The connection between poverty and childlessness is particularly evident among 18-29 years women in Chart 7. The only exception is Belgium. In Portugal there is no connection in risk of poverty between childless women and first birth giving at age category 18-29. In Ireland the non-poverty status seems to be precondition for the transition to parenthood. There all first birth mothers were above the poverty line at the time of conception. Generally young first birth mothers are more likely to be poor than women who have their first birth at their 30s or later. In most countries the positive association between the economic situation and likelihood of first birth is evident still at older age group, but here the strength of the association is weaker.

Compared to average population level poverty risks the poverty risk of those having their first birth in their 30s or later is in every country remarkably lower. This indicates that postponement of transition to parenthood is typically a personally logical compromise. There seem to be a trade-off between poverty and the timing of first birth. Population policies aiming to lower the average age of transition to parenthood should recognize this gap.

Chart 8: Proportion of owners of their accommodation at 18-29 years and at 30-40 years, women without children vs. women with first birth, %

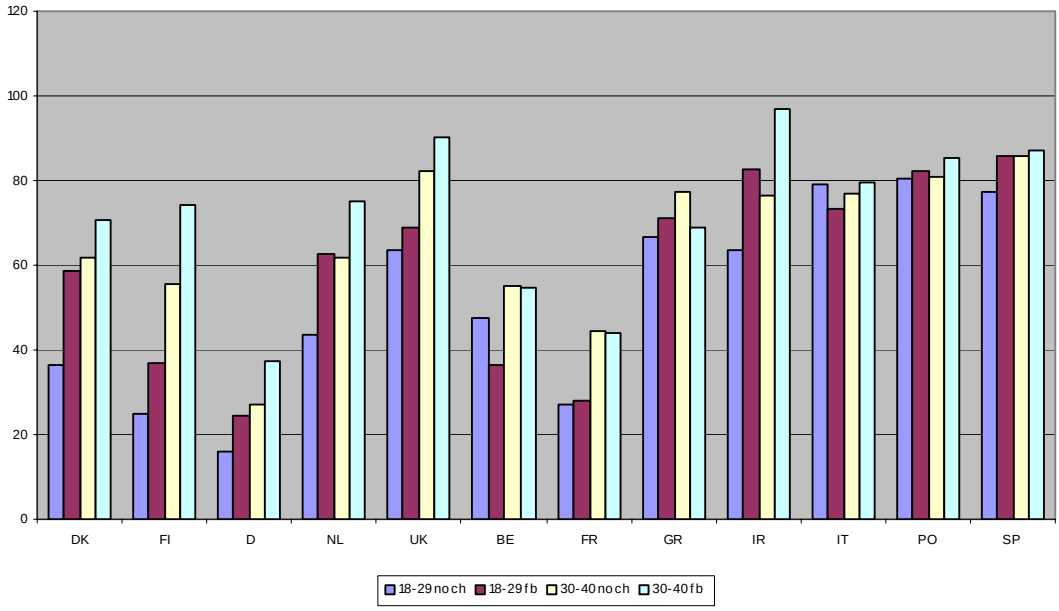
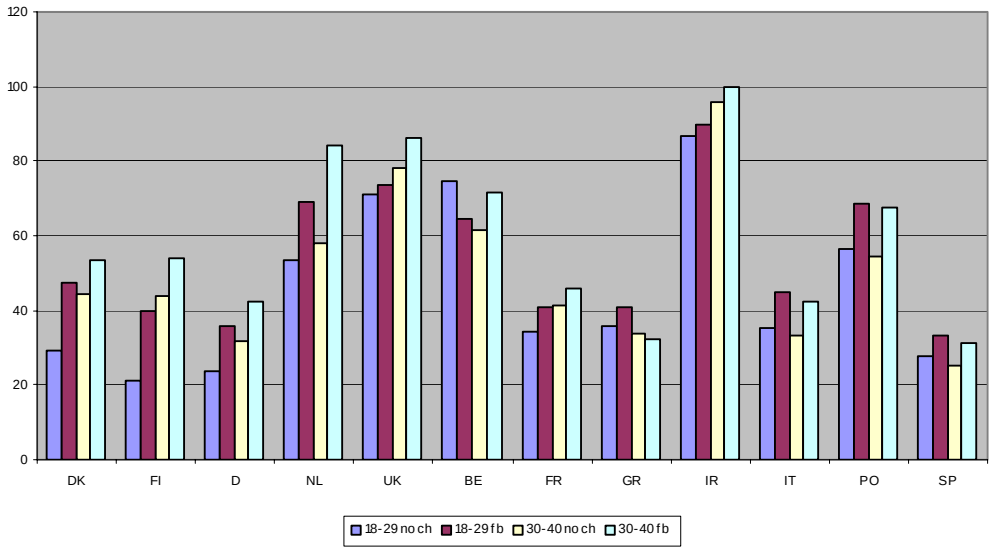


Chart 9. Proportions of living in (semi)detached or terraced or single-family house at 18-29 years and at 30-40 years, women without children vs. women with first birth, %



Home owning (basic wealth) provides basic security and can be assumed to correlate positively with first births. Chart 11 shows that home owning indeed is associated with first births. In Denmark, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK and Ireland this association is very strong, but can be recognized in most other countries as well. In Germany, Belgium and France the tenure structure is more rent based than in other countries, making the first birth givers in these countries most often to be tenants. In other countries a clear majority of first birth givers are owners of their dwelling.

Even more evident is the association between likelihood to transit to parenthood and the kind of accommodation. Except Belgium (18-29 years) and Greece (30-40 years) in all the countries the likelihood of first birth mothers living in detached or semi-

detached or terraced or single-family house is higher than among childless women (Chart 9).

Conclusions

Our results indicate that main division in European first birth patterns is connected to educational attainment. The division is closely associated with family policy models. In all the countries extended education tends to postpone first births, but in the Nordic countries this does not lead to lower overall birth rates of highly educated women, unlike in other countries. Their well-educated women compensate in their 30s rather well for their earlier postponements of childbearing.

The general theory of incompatibility of roles as mother and workers does not hold true in case of the Nordic countries. The Nordic long tradition of reconciling family and work seem to be effective and could be model for other countries to learn lessons. The Nordic problem is the high childlessness of women with low educational attainment.

The results reveal also that postponed first births are not automatically connected to low numbers of completed births. Again the Nordic countries deviate from other European countries. 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. However, the most fertile nation is Ireland with more than 50 per cent of women at age category 18-25 having children and the

smallest proportion of childless women in the age category 36-46. As well the average number of children in Ireland is the highest. The Irish case could be described as traditional and perhaps it is not a good example for others as is the Nordic model. At the other end of continuum are Italy, Spain and Germany with small average number of children at age 36-46.

Our results also 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. Half or more of the first conceptions happen outside marriage. However, in all the countries almost 90 per cent or more live in cohabitation or marrying at the time of their first conception.

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 (not in flats or apartments). In this respect there was no major difference between countries. So we can conclude that universally a logical way to maintain fertility is to support young adults financially, and support them to obtain permanent jobs and to improve their housing conditions. Investments in family policies work simultaneously for family welfare and higher fertility.

From the point of view of women the postponement of first births appears to be a purposeful strategy by which women have obtained more education and gain human capital to be exchanged in the labour market for higher wages and prestige.

References:

Becker, G.S. 1993. A Treatise on the Family. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Bradshaw, J. & Finch, N. 2002, A Comparison of Child Benefit Packages in 22 Countries. Department for Work and Pensions. Research Report 174.

Castles, F. G. & Mitchell, D. 1991. Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism or Four? Australian National University. Discussion paper No 21.

Castles, F. G. 1999. Comparative public policy. Patterns of Post-war Transformation. Edward Elgar.

Castles, F. G. 2004. The Future of the Welfare State. Crisis Myths and Crisis Realities. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Coale, A. J. - Watkins, S. C. 1986. (eds.) The Decline in Fertility in Europe, Princeton University Press.

Edwards, M. A. 2002. Education and Occupations: Re-examining the Conventional Wisdom About Later First Births Among American Mothers. Sociological Forum, Vol 17, No 3, 2002. 423-443.

Esping-Andersen, G. 2002. A Child-centred Social Investment Strategy. In Esping-Andersen, G. - Gallie, D. - Hemerijck, A. & Myles, J. (eds.): Why We Need a New Welfare State. New York, Oxford University Press.

Esping-Andersen, G. 1999. Social Foundations of Postindustrial Economies. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Eurobarometer. 1990.The Family and Desire for Children. Commission of the European Communities. Eurobarometer 12.

Ferrarini, T. 2003. Parental Leave Institutions in Eighteen Post-War Welfare States. Swedish Institute for Social Research, 58. Stockholm's University.

Gornick, J. C. & Meyers, M. K. 2003. Families that Work. Policies for Reconciling Parenthood and Employment. Russell Sage Foundation, New York.

Hobson, B. 2000. Agency, Identities and Institutions. Social Politics, 7 (2), 238-243.

Hoem, B. & Hoem J. M. 1989. The Impact of Women's Employment on Second and Third Births in Modern Sweden. Population Studies 43 (1), 47-67.

Korpi, W. & Palme, J. 1998. The Paradox of Redistribution and Strategies of Equality: Welfare State institutions, Inequality, and Poverty in the Western Countries. American Sociological Review, 63, 661-687.

Lewis, J. 1992. Gender and the Development of Welfare State Regimes. Journal of Social Policy 2 (3), 159-173.

McDonald, P. 2000. Gender Equity, Social Institutions, and the Future of Fertility. Journal of Population Research 17 (1), 1-16.

Myrdal, A. - Myrdal, G. 1934. Kris I befolkningsfrågan. Stockholm, Bonniers.

Orloff, A. 1993. Gender and the Social Rights of Citizenship: State Policies and Gender Relations in Comparative Perspective. American Sociological Review 58 (3), 303-328.

Sainsbury, D. 1996. Gendering Welfare States. Sage Publication, London.

Shalev, M. 2000 Class Meets Gender, Social Politics 7 (2), 220-228

Taylor-Gooby, P. 2004. New Risks and Social Change. In: Taylor-Gooby, P. (ed.): New Risks, New Welfare. The Transformation of the European Welfare State. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Vikat, A. 2004. Women's Labour Force Attachment and Childbearing in Finland. Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research, Working Paper WP 2004-001.