

## **Fertility postponement and ‘recovery’ in the latest-childbearing countries of Europe.**

*A parity-specific analysis of period and cohort fertility trends in Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden.*

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### **Topic**

Intensive fertility postponement has brought a shift towards the late and very late pattern of first birth timing in many countries of Europe. At present, women in at least seven European societies—France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and Switzerland—bear their first child above age 28 on average. This constitutes an increase in the mean age at first birth by about 4 years in the course of 2-3 decades. This study investigates in detail period and cohort fertility changes in four of these latest-childbearing countries: Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, and Sweden. Besides providing sufficient series of fertility data that enable a reconstruction of period and cohort fertility histories, these countries represent well different geographical regions and societal contexts in which very late pattern of entering parenthood has taken place. The spatial, cultural, and institutional contrasts between the latest-childbearing countries are further underlined by different explanations provided for the postponement of parenthood in these societies.

The main goals of this paper may be summarised as follows:

- To investigate commonalities and differences in period and cohort fertility trends, specified by birth order, in countries with very late timing of first birth
- To analyse to what extent is the late timing of parenthood associated with low quantum of fertility
- To study period fertility ‘recovery’ among women past age 30 using the sequential fertility table calculations
- To discuss different explanations of the shift toward the late and very late pattern of first birth timing

## **Theoretical issues**

The process of fertility postponement has become one of the most prominent features of European fertility trends and, consequently, an important issue in fertility research. Many explanations of delayed childbearing—including direct and indirect effects of prolonged education, modern contraceptive technology, economic difficulties and uncertainty among young adults, changing character of partnerships, and difficulties among women to reconcile employment with childcare—have been proposed and analysed. Kohler, Billari, and Ortega (2002) put forward a view of the ‘postponement transition’ toward a late-childbearing regime. However, our understanding of different factors that contribute to the increasing age at parenthood remains fragmentary. Several issues are at the core of the debate on fertility postponement. First, to what extent it contributes to low and extremely low fertility rates recorded in most advanced societies and whether it is possible to eliminate this influence in the period fertility indicators. Second, how strong is the fertility ‘recovery’ among women in later stages of their reproductive period and whether this recovery can be studied in a period perspective. Third, is late timing of childbearing always associated with low fertility quantum? This issue is closely related to biological constraints, which may prevent many women past age 30 from realising their desired family size.

Comparing period and cohort fertility trends as well as explanations of fertility postponement in four countries provides a basis for a search for commonalities between them and for addressing the questions posed above. All detailed indicators are specified by birth order, recognising thus the sequential nature of fertility decision-making as well as the importance of order-specific differences in the context of low and very low fertility.

## **Data & Methods**

This contribution is based on aggregate-level vital statistics and census data that enable a detailed reconstruction of period and cohort fertility, specified by birth order and age of mother. Detailed period fertility data were reconstructed for all the four countries for the period of 1980-2000; the cohort fertility data pertain to the birth cohorts born since 1940, i.e. before the onset of fertility postponement. Selected indicators of first birth timing capture the main trends toward delayed childbearing as well as the increasing age heterogeneity in first birth timing, related to the widening contrasts between different social groups. The detailed analysis of period trends looks at parity-specific lifetime probabilities of giving births to another child, calculated for women in selected ages. These parity-specific calculations are derived from period fertility tables and provide good insights about the extent of fertility recuperation among women past age 30. To provide a backdrop to period fertility analysis, cohort fertility trends are inspected as well.

## **Main results expected**

The analysis shows considerable differences in order-specific fertility quantum as well as in the extent of fertility 'recovery' between the four countries analysed. In all four countries, fertility 'recuperation' among 'older' mothers is strongest in the case of first births and the increase in final childlessness is relatively minor. However, the countries differ strongly in higher-order fertility rates, with Italy and Spain showing a strong decline in the progression rate towards the second child. In contrast, fertility 'recovery' in Sweden was very strong at all birth orders and the aggregate association of delayed childbearing with reduced fertility quantum has been very weak. In fact cohort fertility quantum in Sweden has been surprisingly stable, undisturbed by the sizeable shifts in period fertility. Sweden thus challenges to some extent the argument linking the late childbearing pattern with the (very) low quantum of fertility. The debate on various explanations of delayed childbearing has illustrated that researchers from particular countries often preferred some 'narratives' to the others and highlighted that the massive fertility postponement has been driven by a number of interwoven factors (see also Liefbroer 1999).

## **References**

- Kohler, H.-P., F. C. Billari, and J. A. Ortega. 2002. "The emergence of lowest-low fertility in Europe during the 1990s". *Population and Development Review* 28 (4): 641-680.
- Liefbroer, A. C. 1999. "From youth to adulthood: understanding changing patterns of family formation from a life course perspective". In: L. van Wissen and P. Dykstra (eds.) *Population issues. An interdisciplinary focus*. Kluwer Academic / Plenum Publishers, New York, pp. 53-86.