

UNION FORMATION AND CHILDBEARING IN DEVELOPED COUNTRIES¹

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The number of countries with period total fertility rates at or below replacement increased from 13 in 1970 to 66 in 2002. Countries with below-replacement fertility are not demographically homogenous. For instance, the difference between TFR close to two children per woman in the United States of America and France and just above one in several Southern European, Eastern European and Eastern Asian countries imply the stabilization of population size in the former and population decline and rapid ageing in the latter. Below-replacement fertility is coupled with and partly determined by the high age at first birth in most Western countries (27-29 years), while Eastern European countries are characterized by much younger age patterns of childbearing (a first child being born when the mother is 23-25-years old). The differences among low-fertility regimes, however, are not confined to these period indicators (the variation in their cohort counterparts is narrower but is widening) but encompass a larger range of features of demographic behaviour.

Some demographic changes are universal and simultaneous, others occur with varying timing and several changes are (at least hitherto) confined to particular regions. As a result, at every point in time there are significant inter-regional variations in partnership (particularly in union formation and the diversity of types of unions) and reproductive patterns. The forces that are common for all developed societies drive the universal changes of several demographic characteristics. However, the eventual advent of global homogeneity should not be taken for granted. While most behavioural changes point to the same direction, it is probable that some populations will keep, for a rather long time, their particular features of demographic behaviour. Most likely, these variations result from country-specific cultural, social, institutional and economic distinctiveness. Conventional demographic variables permit to capture major characteristics of partnership and reproduction, while their underlying determinants, especially in the cultural domain, often defy quantitative comparisons. Offsetting this drawback implies the development of a qualitative (narrative) perspective, which is being successfully implemented within the framework of the second demographic transition. The intent of this paper is to present the international cross-sectional and time series macro-data that appear consistent with this concept.

The transition from high to replacement fertility was essentially associated with the decreasing average demand for children by married couples on the one hand and a greatly facilitated implementation of reproductive choices of the spouses on the other hand. The institution of the “bourgeois” marriage was paramount in most developed countries without distinction by socio-economic regime and changed little until the 1970s. Few decades ago, only formal marriage was the socially acceptable type of union; parenting was perceived only as the integral part of marital life and out-of-wedlock childbearing was a rare and unattractive option. Differences between societies in partnership behaviour manifested through the variation of the

¹ Based on United Nations (2004) *Partnership and Reproductive Behaviour in Low-Fertility countries*.

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age at marriage and prevalence of celibacy in the prime reproductive age, both of which were high in the Western countries and low in Eastern Europe.

The transformations of partnership behaviour play the crucial role in the second demographic transition. During the last decades of the 20th century, the family as a social institution changed, obligation and commitment with regard to formal marriage eroded, and new forms of partnership proliferated in many countries. The range of options for individuals expanded. These options consist of permanent or much more prolonged state of celibacy, and of engaging in partnerships that do not assume formal contractual status and may or may not involve childbearing. The diversification of partnership options relaxes obligations to previously strict social norms when choosing the path of union formation. Proportions of never married women in prime reproductive age are increasing almost everywhere (figure 1). Formal marriage and parenthood are drifting apart (figures 3 and 4) and the sequences of events in personal biographies are no longer standardized. However, in the recent decades these transformations were confined mostly to Northern and Western Europe and Northern America, while formal marriage still remains the nearly exclusive form of conjugal unions in most countries of Eastern and Southern Europe and Eastern Asia (figure 2). It is likely that expanding options with respect to union formation became powerful determinants of the perception of parenthood, including the demand for a particular number of children; this issue awaits a thorough exploration.

The levels and trends in the age at first marriage and its prevalence vary across regions. Since the Second World War the age at marriage, which for a long time had been relatively high in the West with the notable exception of the United States of America, further increased by 2-3 years notwithstanding the transitory fall during the baby boom. In some countries the age at first marriage for females approached 30 years – close to the end of the prime reproductive lifespan. The parallel and abrupt fall of the total first marriage rate, which occurred in the 1990s in most developed countries and attained 0.6-0.7 marriages per woman, suggests that formal marriage is receding. In contrast, in Eastern European countries the age at first marriage started to increase only in the 1990s, but it still does not exceed 25 years. Although in Eastern Europe formal marriage is still highly popular among women in prime reproductive age, its prevalence began to decline.

High proportions of never married women past age 30 or 35, which are typical for most Western countries, are indicative of the substantial loss of opportunities for childbearing within formal marital unions. In Northern and Western Europe and the United States of America, the spread of cohabitation partially compensates for the delay of formal marriage and the decrease of nuptiality during the reproductive lifespan. The proportion of women, who, by age 25, entered either a formal or informal union, there remains stable at 70-80 per cent. In Southern Europe the magnitude of cohabitation is marginal: as a result, only 65-75 per cent of women enter a first relationship of any type by age 25. In this respect Eastern Asia is similar to Southern Europe (figure 2).

The evolution of fertility preferences did not stop with the universal stabilization of the average preferred number of children around two. Fertility preferences vary within populations and the national distributions are dissimilar. Moreover, their shapes are in flux. To the extent fertility intentions were implemented, the differences in their distributions within national populations shaped different parity structures of cohorts with identical average completed fertility. The parity-distributional characteristics of reproductive patterns may be illustrated with three scenarios compatible with replacement-level fertility. In the first scenario, replacement can be achieved by a distribution where 20 per cent of women have one child, 30 per cent have two children, 35 per cent have three or more children and 15 per cent remain childless. In the second scenario all women have two children. In the third scenario, population may be polarized into two equal groups: those for whom childlessness is the preferred state and those who have as many as four children. The distribution in the first scenario is close to the actual distribution in the

United States and France. Real populations do not have the extreme distributions of the last two scenarios. Germany provides an example of what happens when widespread childlessness is not compensated by high fertility of a sufficiently large number of women. Current prevalence of childlessness in Germany implies that there should be a distribution where 75 per cent of women have, on average, three children, which is unrealistic.

Low-fertility countries differ by parity structure of recent fertility declines. The proportion of childless women by age 40 increased in the recent decades in several countries, particularly in the United States (where it exceeded 20 per cent) and Germany (where it is close to 30 per cent). Childlessness did not change much and remains moderate in Eastern Europe and France (around 10 percent). Although childlessness is not common in Eastern Asia (5 per cent), low first-order fertility rates (around 0.7 children per woman adjusted for tempo distortions) imply significant increases in the future of the proportion of childless women past age 40.

LOW-FERTILITY REGIONS AND COUNTRIES BY SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS¹ OF REPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR

<i>Age at first birth²</i>	<i>Prevalence of childlessness³</i>	<i>Propensity to have more than one child⁴</i>	<i>Propensity to have three or more children⁵</i>	<i>Region/country</i>
Low	Low	Low	Low High	Former European U.S.S.R.
		High	Low High	Eastern Europe ⁶
	High	Low	Low High	
		High	Low High	United States
High	Low	Low	Low High	
		High	Low High	France
	High	Low	Low High	Eastern Asia, Southern Europe, Austria, Canada, Germany
		High	Low High	Netherlands Northern Europe

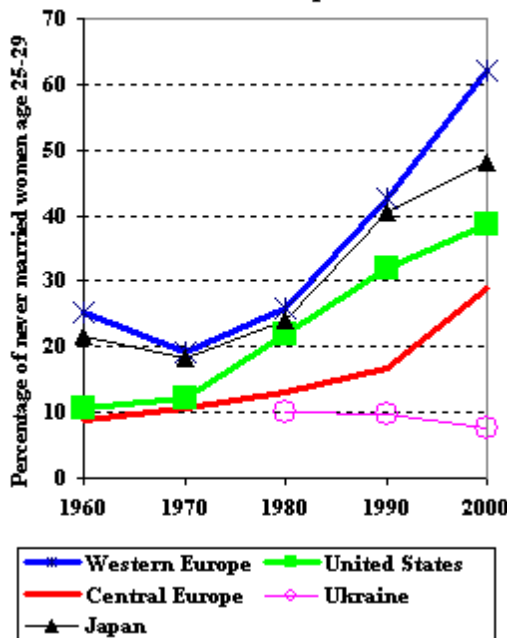
Notes

- 1 lower or higher than the average value of the respective indicator for all countries
- 2 average for 1996-1999: **26** years (40 countries)
- 3 average percentage of childless women born circa 1960: **13** (24 countries)
- 4 average progression ratio from first to second child in the cohorts born circa 1960: **0.75** (10 countries)
- 5 average progression ratio from second to third child in the cohorts born circa 1960: **0.40** (10 countries)
- 6 except former European U.S.S.R.

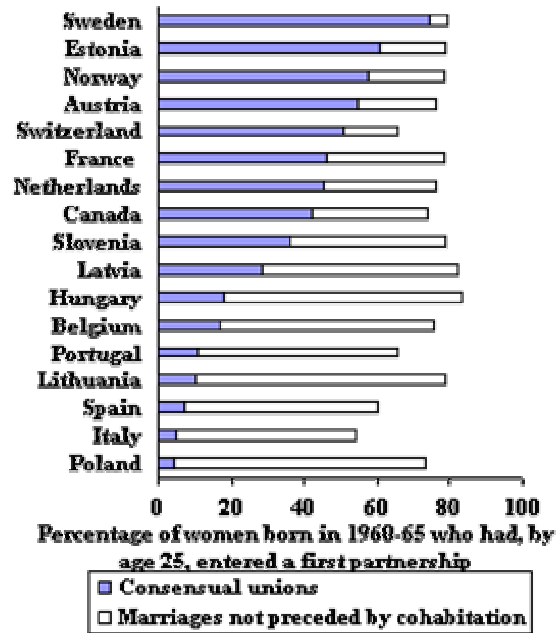
In Northern and Western Europe (except France), rising childlessness was the major component of fertility decline during the last three decades of the 20th century. In other developed regions shrinking of second and higher-order births was a decisive factor of fertility decline. The share of one-child families among small (one to two children) families increased unevenly and currently varies widely from less than 25 per cent in Australia, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom and the United States to more than 40 per cent in Austria, Belgium, the Russian Federation and Spain. The decrease of third and subsequent births determined 80 per cent of the fertility decline from replacement to current levels in the Republic of Korea and Singapore as opposed to less than 15 per cent in Japan and the Russian Federation.

Fertility levels and trends result from varying combinations of numerous demographic parameters (see table), which do not necessarily evolve in parallel. As a result, fertility trends are likely to be non-linear and vary between countries. The cross-classification of key parameters of partnership and reproductive behaviours yields an array of categories containing countries with close values of all parameters. It appears that, despite some movements of countries among categories, the non-empty clusters tend to keep their composition stable for rather long periods of time. Moreover, the countries within the same clusters happen to have in common, besides the characteristics of the demographic behaviour, their belonging (with few exceptions) to geographical groups that correspond to the classification of developed countries into seven geographical regions as adopted by the United Nations and modified by the separation of the former communist countries from those with established market economies. This may be instrumental in formulating scenarios of population projections. From that perspective, all characteristics of the Southern European/Eastern Asian pattern (also applicable to Austria and Germany) are conducive to particularly low fertility, while in the United States of America and France most components of partnership and reproductive behaviour sustain the overall fertility at relatively high level.

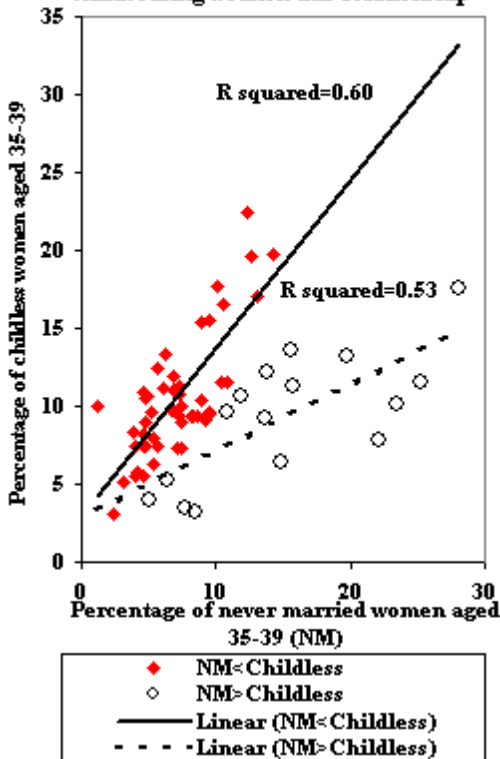
1. Proportions of single women in prime reproductive age are rising, except in Eastern Europe



2. In most countries, most young women live in conjugal unions, but not necessarily in registered unions.



3. Single life is a strong predictor of childlessness, but out-of-wedlock childbearing and postponement of childbearing weaken this relationship



4. Relationship between total first marriage rate and TFR weakened during the last quarter of the 20th century in Western Europe but strenghtened in Eastern and Central Europe

