

**The State of European Unions:  
An analysis of FFS data on partnership formation and dissolution**

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## **Introduction**

In the recent past marriage heralded the start of a first union for most couples in Europe, children were born and reared in these unions, and death typically terminated the union. In recent decades marriage has been transformed. In many European countries it is no longer the marker of first union, children are increasingly being born outside of marriage, and life-long marriage has been eroded by divorce. Here we examine partnership formation and dissolution for a range of countries drawn from different parts of Europe to ascertain the extent and depth of these changes as well as their implications for the private and public domains of life. The aim is to provide a sketch map and description of changes in union behaviour drawing in the main on data from the ECE European Fertility and Family Surveys. More in depth analysis of individual countries and detailed comparisons across groups of nations are to be found in the papers presented at this conference.

## **Incidence of cohabitation**

Since the late 1960s and early 1970s marriage rates in most European countries have declined and one of the important engines behind the decline is the rise in cohabitation that has occurred, particularly since the beginning of the 1980s, in many European countries. A recent perspective on the incidence of cohabitation across the European Community can be gleaned from data from a series of Eurobarometer Surveys carried out in 1996 across the 15 member states. Eurobarometer Surveys are primarily opinion surveys covering a range of topics relevant to the European Union and carried out under the auspices of the administration of the European Union. The 1996 survey had relatively large samples per country typically in the range 3-6000 respondents depending on the size of the population of the particular country. These surveys contain basic demographic information on the respondents including information on marital status that includes as one of the categories "living as married". The other categories being the more conventional ones of single, married, divorced, separated and widowed. There may be under reporting of cohabiting unions in the Eurobarometer data and inaccuracies in the reporting of marital status and data from such surveys are unlikely to be as accurate as those obtained in dedicated family and fertility surveys, but they probably reflect the relative position of different European countries in these developments.

## **Table 1 about here**

Table 1 shows for the 15 European Community countries the proportions of men and women aged 20-24, 25-29 and 30-34 years cohabiting at the time of the survey in 1996. The positioning of the countries generally holds across age groups and the sexes. Across the 15 member states, overall 11 per cent of men and women aged 20-24 reported that they were living as married, 13 per cent of those aged 25-29 years and 10 per cent of the those aged 30-34 years. Only 2.6 per cent of teenagers and 7 per cent of those age 35-39 years reported that they were cohabiting. In these data we cannot differentiate between cohabitations that occur amongst the never-married and those who cohabit after a marriage has broken up, but assume that at the younger ages the former is likely to be the most prevalent. Across European states there is a good deal of diversity in the incidence of cohabitation. Cohabitation is strikingly most common in the Nordic countries of

Denmark, Sweden and Finland, and France also has relatively high proportions cohabiting. There is also a middle group of countries which includes the Netherlands and Belgium, Great Britain, West and East Germany, and Austria with intermediate levels of cohabitation and at the other extreme is the group of Southern European countries and Ireland, where cohabitation is seemingly much rarer with only a tiny minority cohabiting.

Within countries the peak ages of cohabitation for both men and women are the twenties and in many countries the proportions cohabiting in the early twenties and late twenties are broadly similar. The proportions in cohabiting unions are typically lower in the thirties. In a period of rising cohabitation it would be expected that younger people would be more likely to cohabit than older people. However the data for Sweden and Denmark, where cohabiting unions have been long-standing, suggest that the drop in the extent of cohabiting unions beyond the twenties may be real rather than transitory. Moreover, we note that in most EU countries cohabitation when viewed in cross-section is a minor practice amongst people in their twenties, and even more so amongst those in their thirties.

### **Marital status distributions**

#### **Figure 1 about here**

If men and women are not in cohabiting unions are they in marital unions? Figure 1 shows the proportions of women aged 25-29 years in the 15 countries who were cohabiting, single, married or separated/divorced/widowed. It is clear from these data that there is a good deal of variation in the proportions of women in marital unions. The Southern European countries of Greece and Portugal where over 60 per cent of women in their late 20s are married exemplify one extreme. However, within the set of southern European countries there is a remarkable difference in the behaviour of Italian and Spanish women as compared with the Portuguese and Greek women: over 60 per cent of the Italian women are single and 50 per cent of Spanish women are single compared with around one in three of the Portuguese and Greek women. It would seem that not only are men and women in Spain and Italy avoiding parenthood they are also not forming partnerships either, at least in their twenties. In the Nordic countries of Denmark, Sweden and Finland as well as in France, broadly speaking, the proportions in the three main marital status groups are similar at around one third. Marriage is seemingly most popular in the western European countries: notably in Great Britain, Ireland, the Netherlands and Belgium.

### **Union Formation: evidence from the European Fertility and Family Surveys**

The cross-sectional information from the Eurobarometer Surveys indicates that there is a good deal of intra-European diversity in the extent of cohabiting unions, marital unions and being single. To examine partnership behaviour in more detail we use data for a range of Western and Eastern European countries included in the set of European Fertility and Family Surveys (FFS) which were carried out in the main in the first half of the 1990s under the auspices of the UN Economic Commission for Europe. These countries along with the dates of interview and the age range of the respondents are

shown in Table 2. With the exception of Norway and Finland the surveys took place in the first half of the 1990s. The timing and elapsed time for some of the surveys need to be borne in mind when making comparisons. In the following analyses the countries have been sub-divided into four sets: the Nordic one includes Norway, Finland and Sweden; the Western European set includes Austria, Switzerland France, Great Britain and Germany (we further subdivide Germany into East and West given its different history for much of the post-war period); the Southern European set including Italy and Spain; and an Eastern European set including Poland, Hungary, Latvia and Lithuania. The Fertility and Family Surveys included a full partnership history that incorporated dates of marriages and any other co-residential heterosexual intimate relationships for both male and female respondents. The question pertaining to non-marital partnerships was as follows “ have you ever lived in the same household with someone with whom you had an intimate relationship but did not marry?” For Britain, which did not participate in the FFS enterprise we use the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) which collected a retrospective partnership history in Wave 2, carried out in 1992. The FFS data used here come from standard recode files supplied by the individual countries to the Population Activities Unit at the UN Economic Commission for Europe. Details on the questionnaire can be found in Fertility and Family Surveys Questionnaire and Codebook (UN 1992) and technical matters relating to the individual countries can be found in the Standard Country Reports (UNECE, 1996 onwards).

## **Table 2 about here**

### **Never-partnered**

Our examination of the Eurobarometer data highlighted the marked variations in the proportions single across European nations. However, reporting oneself as single does not necessarily carry the implication of never having been in a union. Single as a civil status means never-married but in common usage it has come increasingly to mean being currently without a partner and used by the separated and divorced as well as the never married to describe their partnership status. The partnership histories included in the FFS surveys allowed us to isolate men and women who reported never having lived together with a partner of the opposite sex.

## **Table 3 about here**

Table 3 shows the proportions of men and women in the age groups 25-29 and 30-34 years who had never been in a co-residential partnership at the time of the surveys. As would be expected the proportions never-partnered decline with age and are typically higher amongst men than women, a profile that replicates the patterns found in marital histories. Let us focus in on women aged 25-29 years to highlight the variation across these European nations in the proportions who had never partnered. The lowest proportions never-partnered at these ages are to be seen in the Nordic countries (around 10 per cent) and the highest proportions (30 per cent or more) are to be found in West Germany, Spain and Italy, but most countries (10 out of the 15) have never-partnered proportions that lie within the 10 to 15 per cent range.

## Changes over time

It is apparent that there are differences across European nations in the extent to which men and women have never been in a partnership in their late twenties. The next question posed was whether there has been any decline in the propensity to form partnerships over time. To this end we compared the estimated proportions of women who had never had a co-residential partnership by the time they were aged 25, amongst those who were aged 25-29 at the time of the survey and amongst those ten years older, those aged 35-39, at the time of the survey. An examination of the lower part of Figure 2 shows that in all the countries from Switzerland down to Sweden the proportions never partnered by age 25 has changed very little over the decade encompassed by the two age groups 25-29 and 35-39. This implies that the marked change in the never-married population observed in many northern and west European countries is less to do with the avoidance of partnerships and more to do with the substitution of marital unions by cohabiting unions. Similarly, in the four Eastern European countries there was little evidence of a decline in partnership formation over the cohorts included in this analysis. However, there is evidence from marriage registration data (Council of Europe, 1999) of movements to later age at marriage during the 1990s, so there may well have been changes amongst more recent cohorts of young people (for detailed discussion of Lithuania see the paper by Stankuniene for this conference). The countries where there has seemingly been a marked decline in the proportions of women forming partnerships by age 25 are the two Southern European countries of Spain and Italy along with West Germany, and there is evidence of somewhat lesser declines in East Germany and Britain.

### **Figure 2 about here**

In Spain and Italy it is a long-established tradition that young people live at home with their parents until they marry (see Billeria et al, 2000 for a detailed analysis of these two countries) and the welfare regimes of these two nations is more family based, rather than state based as is the case in many Northern and Western countries (Reher,1998). Thus, in a period of high youth unemployment and rising educational participation, particularly at the tertiary level as has occurred in these southern European countries, it is probably not surprising that marriage tends to be delayed. Moreover, parents may be less willing to assist with the establishment of an independent household if the partnership is cohabitation rather than a legal marriage. The reasons for the partnership bust in West Germany are more elusive as there are less obvious structural changes that might account for this development.

### Non co-residential relationships

Having never partnered does not necessarily imply the lack of relationships. The FFS captured some information on "extra-mural" relationships by asking those in non co-residential unions whether they were "currently having an intimate relationship with someone who lives in a separate household". Table 4 shows the proportions of never-partnered men and women answering yes to this question for a set of countries that included it on their interview schedule. Across these nations we see that between a third and one half of the never-partnered under age 40 reported that they were in an intimate non co-residential relationship. There was a tendency (stronger in some countries than others) for higher proportions of the never-partnered currently in their twenties

compared with those in their thirties to report they were in an intimate relationship with someone who lived elsewhere. In six of the countries men were less likely than women to report an extra-mural relationship, in Spain, Hungary and Latvia the reverse was the case. However, only in France, West and East Germany and Italy were the sex differences statistically significant (at the 5 per cent level or less). The respondents were also asked whether they were living separately because they “wanted to” or because they “had to”, or both. The final column in Table 4 gives the percentage of men and women who responded that they “wanted to”. There was a good deal of variation across nations in the responses to this question. Around 70 per cent of the West German and 60 per cent of the Swiss respondents said that this arrangement was a choice rather than a constraint, whereas under a third of the Spanish and French respondents said that they wanted to live in this way. In the other countries around 4 out of 10 stated that they wanted this kind of living arrangement. There was seemingly no consistent difference across nations in the ways men and women responded to this question. In France, Switzerland, West Germany, Spain and Italy women were more likely than men to express that living apart was through choice whereas in Austria and Hungary there was little difference between the responses for the two sexes, and in East Germany the reverse was the case. However, the only significant differences (at the 5 per cent level) in the responses of men and women were for Spain, Italy and Switzerland.

#### **Table 4 about here**

From a single question such as that posed in the FFS surveys on whether one is in an intimate relationship with someone who lives elsewhere, it is unclear as to whether the respondent is referring to a romantic attachment which may or may not be exclusive, a visiting union, or a “living apart together” (LAT) type relationship or other variants such as commuter marriages and split living arrangement where people spend some time at each other’s residences. Moreover, the process of becoming a couple is relatively uncharted territory compared with times past when there were more identifiable stages in the courtship process typically including engagement, marriage and setting up home together in that order. Nowadays, in countries where young people have a period of living independently from their parents before forming a union, there may well be more flexible and complex living arrangements which are not captured with traditional survey questions. If we wish to understand the chronology of romantic relationships, both co-residential and otherwise, our armoury of questions needs to be enhanced. Ascertaining linkages across households has also become more important with the growth in divorce as there are typically continuing ties, both emotional and economic, between non-residential parents and their children. The changing demography of partnership increasingly speaks to data collection that spreads beyond the focus of residence.

#### **Type of first partnership**

We now proceed to an examination of type of first partnership amongst those ever-partnered and to simplify the analyses we will concentrate only on women. Here we identify three types of first partnership according to type of first union: namely whether the respondents married directly with no cohabitation, whether they cohabited and then married, and thirdly whether they cohabited and the union had dissolved or was continuing at the time of the interview. Table 5 shows the proportions falling into these three groups amongst women aged 25-29 and 35-39 at the time of the surveys.

## **Table 5 about here**

It is clear from Table 5, for the most recent generation, those aged 25-29, that for the majority of women in Eastern and Southern European countries marriage still heralds the start of a first partnership, whereas this is only the case for a minority in the Nordic and Western European nations. In these latter two regions, cohabitation typically initiates a first union and around 30 to 40 per cent of first unions were cohabitations that had converted into a marriage with the same partner.

To assess the extent of change over time we compared the experiences of women aged 25-29 at the time of the survey with those aged 35-39. With respect to the probability of marrying directly, we see that not marrying directly was already well established and at a very low level amongst the older generation of Swedish women. There have also been some noticeable declines in other countries. For example, in Norway the proportions marrying directly was 24 per cent amongst those aged 25-29 years (cohort 1960) but had been of the order of 62 per cent amongst the generation born ten years earlier (cohort 1950). Similarly in France we see a marked decline from 48 per cent in the earlier generation to 12 per cent amongst the younger one, in West Germany a decline from 38 to 16 per cent, and in Great Britain a decline from 72 per cent to 37 per cent. A somewhat slower pace of change is to be seen in the other countries, such as Switzerland and Austria. Amongst the countries with over 70 per cent marrying directly we see signs of change in Hungary and Spain, but this is less the case in Poland, Lithuania and Italy. These data highlight not only the diversity across European nations but also the differential pace of change across nations.

### **Sub-group differences**

As well as cross-national variation in union formation behaviour there are likely to be distinct variations within nations and between sub-groups of the population. The FFS surveys only included a limited amount of background information on the respondents but we were able to examine three important dimensions namely: variation according to educational level, religious observance, and experience of parental separation.

## **Table 6 about here**

Given the expansion in tertiary education that has occurred in recent decades in most European countries we looked at the patterns of first partnership according to educational level within age groups. Table 6 shows the proportions for a younger generation of women, those aged 25-29 at the time of the survey, who married directly according to their level of education divided into three levels. This is a crude categorisation: with level 3 broadly encompassing the graduate group; level 2 a middle group with secondary education and level 1 pre-secondary education. The proportions in these 3 educational groups varies across nations as indicated in the final column of Table 6 which shows the proportions of women who had attained graduate or equivalent status. Perusal of Table 6 shows that there are no simple observations to be made, or a generalisable pattern to be seen, with respect to union formation and educational level. In some countries there is little association between educational level and propensity to marry directly as opposed to commencing with a cohabitation; whereas in others there is some evidence that those with the lowest level are more likely to marry directly; and in yet others there is a curvilinear relationship, with the least educated and the most

educated being more likely to marry directly. However, in most countries the lowest proportions marrying directly are to be found amongst those classified as having level 3 education. So, amongst women in the latter half of their twenties who have entered a union there are indications that commencing a first union with cohabitation is somewhat more common amongst the most highly educated groups.

### **Table 7 about here**

Turning to religion Table 7, shows the proportions of women under age 40 who married directly according to whether they attended church on some occasions versus those who reported that they practically never did. From the last column we see that there was some variation in the proportions responding in this way; as one might expect non-attendance was rare in Italy and Poland and more common in East Germany and Sweden. However, within a given country we see that those who married directly were more likely to attend church than their contemporaries who had commenced their first partnership with cohabitation. Thus, across Europe cohabitation appears to be associated with the more secular groups within a population. This finding is in line with research for a number of developed countries which has shown cohabitation to be more common amongst the most secular groups and other research has shown this to be the case when cohabitation was rare as well as when cohabitation became more popular (for a detailed discussion see Lesthaeghe and Moors, 1996).

The final background factor examined is one that is pertinent to changing patterns of union formation; namely whether there had been experience of parental separation or divorce. There is evidence for the USA and Great Britain (e.g. Thornton, 1991 and Kiernan, 1992) that children who experience parental divorce are more likely to cohabit and have children outside of marriage

### **Table 8 about here**

The Fertility and Family Surveys included a question on whether the parents of the respondents had ever separated or divorced and the age at which this occurred. Table 8 shows the proportions of women who had married directly according to whether they had experienced parental divorce during childhood. It is clear that, in all these countries, the proportions marrying directly is invariably higher amongst those who did not experience parental divorce during childhood than amongst those who did. This applies in Northern European, Western European, Eastern and Southern European countries; in countries where marrying directly is rare and cohabitation normative as in Sweden, and in countries where marrying directly is normative and cohabitation is relatively rare such as Italy. All these differences were statistically significant at least the 5 per cent level. The preference for cohabiting amongst children who experienced a parental separation or divorce may well represent reluctance on the part of young people with such an experience to make a permanent commitment, such as that enshrined in legal marriage. Alternatively, given the experience of parental separation they may want to be more certain about committing to a permanent relationship and may take longer in the search for their ideal partner, or in testing the strength of the relationship via cohabitation before committing to marriage. This consistency of the association between parental separation and cohabitation across nations suggests that this finding could be added to the list of robust associations with respect to contemporary demographic behaviour.

## **Duration of cohabiting unions**

### **Table 9 about here**

How long do first partnerships that commenced with cohabitation last? This is not a question with a straightforward answer, as estimates of the duration of cohabiting unions need to take into account exit through marriage, exit through dissolution and for those unions that continue, censoring at the time of the interview. Life table analysis was used to estimate the proportions of cohabitations that had converted into marriages or dissolved by a specified time from the start of the union. Table 9 shows, for those countries where cohabitation is more prevalent, the proportions that had converted into marriages and had dissolved within 2 and 5 years for women aged 25-29 and those aged 35-39 at the time of the survey. There is some variation in the propensity to marry across nations and age groups. Sweden along with the younger generation of French women exhibit the lowest conversion rate to marriage; only 1 in 3 cohabitations had become marriages within five years of the start of the partnership. In most other countries 1 in 2 cohabitations had converted to marriages by the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the union. In some countries there are indications of a decline in the propensity to marry over time, most noticeably in Norway, France and Sweden whereas in other countries there is less sign of change, for example, West Germany, Great Britain, Austria and Switzerland and in other signs of an increase, for example, East Germany. Turning to the extent to which cohabiting unions dissolve we see amongst the more recent generation those aged 25-29, that in most countries around 1 in 10 had dissolved by the 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the start of the union and by the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary around 1 in 3 had dissolved. In most countries more of the cohabiting unions of the younger generation had dissolved by the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the start of the union. We consider the issue of partnership dissolution in more detail in the next section.

## **Partnership Dissolution**

Across Europe, divorce has increased from the late 1960s and early 1970s up into the 1980s, since when rates have tended to stabilise, but there continues to be cross-national variation in the extent of divorce (Council of Europe, 1999). Moreover, with the rise in cohabitation, data on divorce are increasingly likely to be underestimates of the extent partnership breakdown. Here we examine the issue of partnership dissolution, using the data from the partnership histories collected in the FFS for those countries that had medium to high levels of cohabitation. A central interest was an assessment of the relative fragility of the different types of first union: direct marriage, cohabitations that converted into marriage, and cohabiting unions that had not converted into a marriage by the time of the survey.

### **Pre-marital cohabitation and marital dissolution**

In an earlier study on a range of Western European nations, (Kiernan, 1999) we posed the simple question how long do these unions survive and calculated life tables for the three types of unions. This was a simple descriptive analysis based on a known outcome. This analysis showed cohabiting unions to be generally more fragile than marital unions and cohabiting unions that had not converted into marriages were the

most fragile. However, this approach showed that there was little difference in the extent to which unions had broken up by a particular anniversary from the onset of partnership for direct marriages or marriages that were preceded by a period of cohabitation. This method did not take into account the competing risks of marriage and dissolution at a given point in time.

### **Table 10 about here**

Here we analyse the data taking into account competing risks. We address a number of questions. Firstly, we ask whether marriages are more likely to break down if they are preceded by a period of cohabitation. Cox proportional hazard models were used, with the survival time being the duration of marriage to dissolution or censoring at the time of the survey. Whether cohabitation preceded marriage or not was treated as a fixed co-variate. We also included a control for age at first marriage and two background factors; namely whether parental divorce had been experienced during childhood and whether the respondent was or not a non or infrequent attendee at church. The first column in Table 10 shows the relative risks of marriage breakdown for those who cohabited prior to marriage relative to those who married directly; column 2 includes a control for age at first marriage, experience of parental divorce and whether the woman attended church or not. In some countries there is evidence that those who cohabit prior to marriage have a higher risk of marital dissolution (France, Germany and Sweden) and in other countries this is not the case (Norway, Finland, Austria and Latvia).

### Duration of pre-marital cohabitation and marital dissolution

We also investigated whether length of cohabitation prior to marriage had any bearing on dissolution risks. For example, short duration cohabitations may have different implications than longer periods of cohabitation, in that short cohabitations may be more likely to include people with a greater commitment to marriage than those who cohabit more long term. Table 10 shows, for a selection of countries, the relative risks of marital dissolution according to duration of pre-marital cohabitation. The reference category is those who cohabited for 1-6 months prior to marriage. Interestingly, the evidence from this simple analysis suggests that in these countries there is little variation in the relative risk of marital breakdown according to length of pre-marital cohabitation.

### **Table 11 about here**

### Type of first partnership and partnership dissolution

The second question addressed was to what extent the risk of breakdown varied across our three different types of first union. In this analysis the clock starts at onset of first partnership and entry into marriage is included as a time varying co-variate for those cohabitations that became marriages. The states of marriage are distinguished namely: married at start of partnership, and married after cohabitation. Age at first partnership and the two background factors, parental divorce and degree of religious observance were also included in the analysis. Table 12 shows the relative risk of partnership breakdown for the three types of designated first partnership. Model 1 provides the gross risk and Model 2 includes controls for age at first partnership, church attendance

and experience of parental divorce. It is clear that across all the countries continuing cohabiting unions, not unsurprisingly, had the highest risk of breakdown, with a level of risk that was substantially higher than that observed for direct marriages and converted unions.

The results for unions that had converted into marriages were more varied. Focusing on Model 2 in Table 12 we see evidence of an elevated risk of breakdown for these marriages in France, West and East Germany and to a lesser extent in Sweden, whilst in remaining countries there is little difference in the risk of dissolution of converted unions compared with direct marriages. From these analyses there is robust cross-national evidence that cohabiting unions that had not converted to marriages were the most fragile unions but that the role of pre-marital cohabitation in union dissolution is more variable across nations.

### **Table 12 about here**

#### Parental divorce, religious observance and partnership dissolution

We showed above that in all the countries included in our analyses children who experienced parental divorce were more likely to commence their first partnership with cohabitation rather than marriage. We also included it as a factor in our partnership dissolution analyses. A number of studies have shown experience of parental divorce to be associated with an increased risk of marital breakdown in the child's own marriage (Mueller and Pope, 1977, Glenn and Kramer, 1987, Kiernan and Cherlin, 1999). Here we assess the extent to which partnership breakdown is more common amongst children who have experienced parental divorce for the set of FFS countries included in our analysis. The first column in Table 13 shows the gross relative risk of partnership breakdown according to whether or not the woman had experienced parental divorce. The second column shows the relative risk of partnership breakdown taking into account type and age at first partnership and whether the women attended church or not. It is clear from this table that across all the countries children who experienced parental divorce during childhood were significantly more likely to experience partnership breakdown in adulthood compared with those without such an experience.

We performed a similar analysis for whether the women attended church or not and the results are shown columns 3 and 4 in Table 13. For the Western European countries shown here there was an association between attendance at church and risk of partnership breakdown but in the two Nordic countries, most noticeably in Sweden the association was attenuated when type of first partnership, age at first partnership and experience of parental divorce were included as controls. In Latvia and East Germany there was little evidence of an association between degree of religious observance and partnership breakdown.

### **Table 13 about here**

#### **Number of partnerships**

The final aspect of partnership behaviour we examined was partnership turnover. Partnership dissolution opens up the possibilities of re-partnering and, with the rise in

divorce that has occurred in many European countries in recent decades, men and women are increasingly likely to have several partnerships over their life. Table 14 shows the number of partnerships, including marriages and cohabitations, reported by women aged 35-39 years at the time of the FFS survey. It is noticeable that partnership turnover is not extensive; the majority of women have only had one partnership, in the 70-80 per cent range in most countries but somewhat higher in Poland, and the two southern European countries of Italy and Spain. Only a tiny proportion report having had three or more partnerships with the highest proportion being 6 per cent in Sweden. Detailed studies of re-partnering are rare but see Eva Bernhardt's paper for this conference on repartnering among Swedish men and women.

**Table 14 about here**

### **Policy background and responses**

The changing demography of partnership has far reaching implications for the men, women and children involved. There is already an extensive and growing literature on the legacy of divorce and partnership dissolution (examples include, McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994, Bradshaw et al 1996) which shows the negative impact of these developments for the public and private purse, as well as the far reaching repercussions that partnership breakdown has for the emotional and physical health, and the social and economic welfare of the individual's involved. Here, I want to focus more on some of the implications of rising levels of cohabitation for the private and public domains of life, and in particular examine some of the policy responses that there have been to this development in European nations.

In the past, ties between spouses were deemed to be of sufficient importance that marriages and divorces were included within the scope of vital registration systems. The rise of cohabitation has eroded this public acknowledgement and raises policy questions about the links between partners and unmarried parents and their children with respect to the public domains of life. Many European countries are recognising that changes in union behaviour are under way and marriage law, practices and values, and the assumptions on which public policies are built are being evaluated. Here we sketch some of these developments for a range of (Western) European countries.

To date there have been a variety of policy responses to the emergence of cohabitation in different European countries. At the beginning of 1998 the Netherlands, a country with intermediate levels of cohabitation and low rates of non-marital childbearing, instituted the formal registration of partnerships for both heterosexual and homosexual couples which made legally registered cohabitation functionally equivalent to marriage, except that cohabiting couples do not have the right to adopt. In the early 1990s, Denmark instituted the legal registration of homosexual partnerships, but the Netherlands was the first country in Europe to formalise heterosexual cohabitation. However, Registered Partnerships in the Netherlands were primarily instituted to meet the needs of gay couples who did not have the option of marriage. Marriage for gay couples is now a strong possibility so the registration of heterosexual cohabitation may be short-lived (Schrama, 1999).

In France, where the rise of cohabitation and non-marital childbearing has followed a similar trend to the developments in the Nordic countries, the government instituted

Civil Solidarity Pacts (PACS) in October 1999 (without a good deal of preceding controversy) which allow homosexual and heterosexual couples to enter legal agreements that will give unmarried couples (co-residing for a minimum of 3 years) broadly equivalent inheritance, tax, health and tenancy rights to those now held by married couples. In France, the PACS were originally conceived as meeting the demands of gay organisations for a form of legally recognised marriage ceremony. However, to avoid homophobic attacks from the right wing the government broadened the idea to include heterosexuals.

In Sweden, Finland and Denmark, a more pragmatic approach has been taken to cohabiting couples. Over time family law has come to be applied to married and cohabiting couples in the same way, recognising that legislation developed to meet the needs of married couples is also suited to the needs of unmarried couples (Bradley, 1996). Norway established a Commission to examine the issue, reporting in late 1999, which accepted the need for a law regulating heterosexual cohabitation where this was “marriage like:” that is where there are children or where the relationship had lasted for two years or more (Noack, 2000). In Britain, the Lord Chancellor’s Department is due to report on issues pertaining to cohabitation in 2000 but the main focus is likely to be on property issues. In Germany, the protection of the family enshrined in the constitution applies only to marriage and not to “marriage like partnerships” (Ditch, Barnes, and Bradshaw, 1996), which implies a principled commitment not to accord equal status to married and cohabiting relationships, although private law could be changed. So just as the phenomenon of cohabitation is diverse and complex the responses to date have been equally variable, suggesting that there are few simple straightforward solutions to this development in family life.

## **Conclusion**

Analyses of comparative data on union behaviour from the Fertility and Family Surveys showed there to be marked variation in the ways men and women are forming and maintaining partnerships across European nations. In this study we saw that in Southern European and some Eastern European countries marriage is still the pre-eminent marker for entry into first union; whereas in most West and Northern European countries cohabitation has eclipsed marriage as the marker for first partnership, and in the Nordic countries and France there is evidence that long-term cohabitation has become more prevalent. But whether most countries are on the same trajectory to an ultimate destination where marriage and cohabitation are largely indistinguishable or even where cohabitation overtakes marriage as the dominant form of union remains to be seen. The likely course of partnership dissolution is also difficult to foresee. Divorce has certainly increased in most European nations but whether the variation in current levels is maintained or countries gravitate to a similar high level also awaits the future. The rise in cohabitation and the relative fragility of such unions perhaps signals more partnership dissolution and turnover in the future, but the saliency of this for public policy will depend on the positioning of children within the partnership history. Nevertheless, the developments in cohabitation and divorce to date have already eroded the primacy of marriage as the basis of family life (albeit to different degrees across nations) such that public policies built upon the notion of life-long, heterosexual, legal and co-residential unions have been and continue to be evaluated.

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**Table 1: Percentage cohabiting according to age group and sex in 1996**

Country	Women			Men		
	20-24	25-29	30-34	20-24	25-29	30-34
Denmark	45	35	19	43	43	23
Sweden	39	33	22	24	39	31
Finland	28	27	16	23	29	14
France	25	30	19	13	24	27
Netherlands	17	16	8	10	23	13
Belgium	15	12	7	6	16	8
Luxembourg	10	10	-	2	2	4
Britain	13	12	7	11	16	9
W. Germany	16	9	7	10	15	11
E. Germany	13	8	4	7	11	7
Austria	10	8	9	1	10	7
Ireland	2	3	4	3	6	3
Spain	3	3	3	1	2	4
Portugal	3	1	1	1	-	2
Greece	1	1	1	2	2	-
Italy	-	-	4	-	-	3
All countries	14	13	9	9	14	11
Source:	Analysis	of	Eurobarometer	No	44	1996

Table 2: UN ECE Fertility and Family Surveys and BHPS: year of interview and age range

**Fertility and Family Surveys**

Country	Year	Age range
Norway	1988/89	20-43*
Finland	1989/90	22-51
Sweden	1992/93	23-43*
France	1994	20-49
Austria	1996	20-54
Switzerland	1994/95	20-49
Germany	1992	20-39
Italy	1995/96	20-49
Spain	1994/95	18-49

**British Household Panel Survey**

Great Britain	1992	16-97
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\* Specific cohorts

Table 3: Percentage of men and women never-partnered by age group

	Women		Men	
	25-29	30-34	25-29	30-34
Sweden *	10	4	18	10
Norway **	11	5	20	-
Finland	9	5	7	3
France	11	7	29	13
Great Britain	16	6	22	13
Austria	17	6	35	18
Switzerland	15	6	32	10
West Germany	33	15	55	28
East Germany	15	7	29	10
Spain	32	12	52	20
Italy	47	17	76	35
Latvia	13	5	16	10
Lithuania	14	8	21	6
Hungary	10	4	14	5
Poland	14	11	24	20

Analysis of FFS and BHPS data

\* Sweden 1959 and 1964 cohorts    \*\* Norway 1955 and 1960 cohorts

**Table 4** Percentage of never-partnered women reporting “Yes” to question: “are you currently having an intimate relationship with someone who lives in a separate household” according to age group and amongst those living apart the percentage responding that they are living apart because they “want to”.

Country	20-24	25-29	30-34	All 20-39	% Want to
France					
Men	39	22	10	29	22
Women	37	47	30	37	31
Austria					
Men	46	38	47	43	48
Women	50	42	42	47	48
Switzerland					
Men	54	41	46	46	57
Women	54	53	43	51	66
West Germany					
Men	35	45	27	37	69
Women	50	49	43	48	74
East Germany					
Men	32	29	19	29	49
Women	43	38	30	39	42
Spain					
Men	41	45	31	40	21
Women	37	38	25	36	27
Italy					
Men	41	50	42	43	34
Women	48	58	40	49	43
Latvia					
Men	49	57	44	49	*
Women	46	43	38	44	*
Hungary					
Men	47	42	32	43	40
Women	43	42	17	38	42

\*

Question

not

asked

Table 5: Type of first partnership amongst women with a first partnership according to age group at the time of the survey

	<b>Married directly</b>	<b>Cohabited and Married</b>	<b>Cohabited</b>	<b>Married directly</b>	<b>Cohabited and Married</b>	<b>Cohabited</b>
	<b>Age-group</b>	<b>25-29</b>		<b>Age-group</b>	<b>35-39</b>	
Sweden (1)	7	41	52	8	62	30
Norway (2)	24	40	35	62	30	7
Finland	17	43	40	31	46	23
France	12	30	58	48	34	19
Great Britain	37	33	31	72	18	10
Austria	19	41	40	30	42	28
Switzerland	19	44	37	30	52	18
West Germany	16	38	46	38	33	29
East Germany	15	35	50	21	26	53
Spain	80	8	12	91	4	5
Italy	86	8	6	91	5	4
Latvia	50	34	17	67	26	8
Lithuania	75	9	16	78	10	12
Hungary	76	14	10	84	9	7
Poland	95	3	2	96	3	1

(1) Sweden birth cohorts 54 and 64 (2) Norway birth cohorts 50 and 60

Table 6: Proportions married directly according to level of education amongst women with a first partnership and aged 25-29 years at the time of the survey and proportion of all women aged 25-29 with Level 3 qualifications.

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Proportion of all 25-29 year old women with Level 3 qualifications
Sweden	14	8	6	35
Norway	-	31	23	58
Finland	14	16	19	16
France	19	11	9	25
Great Britain*	40	43	27	12
Austria	25	19	17	19
Switzerland	45	16	19	14
West Germany	27	14	12	12
East Germany	23	20	17	31
Spain	85	79	66	23
Italy	89	85	92	10
Latvia	-	51	44	22
Lithuania	-	77	74	45
Hungary	79	75	68	15
Poland	93	96	99	16

\* Great Britain not directly comparable Level 1 is no qualifications level 2 intermediate level including GCSE to A Levels or equivalent level 3 higher and degree level qualifications.

Table 7: Proportions married directly according to some church attendance versus none amongst women who had a partnership and were aged 20-39 years at the time of the survey

	Some attendance at church	Never attends church	% Reporting never attended church
Sweden	12	4	66
Norway	50	23	67
Finland	25	14	35
Great Britain*	59	41	45
Switzerland	31	14	41
West Germany	32	16	43
East Germany	23	14	77
Spain	90	80	53
Italy	90	81	9
Latvia	60	51	31
Hungary	82	73	44
Poland	96	88	7

France, Austria and Lithuania did not include this question. Great Britain nearest equivalent data used.

Table 8: Per cent married directly by experience of parental separation or divorce at age 16 or under amongst women aged 20-39 years at the time of the survey.

Country	Parental	Divorce	% with parental divorce
	Yes	No	
Sweden	3	7	14
Finland *	16	21	8
France	14	29	18
Austria	8	25	13
Switzerland	16	24	14
West Germany	17	26	14
East Germany	12	18	21
Spain	67	86	6
Italy	65	88	4
Latvia	46	62	26
Lithuania	72	77	21
Hungary	66	81	17
Poland	85	96	5

Finland did not ask age at parental divorce. Norway and Great Britain did not include a question on parental divorce.

Table 9: Proportions (derived from life-table analysis) of first cohabiting unions that had converted to marriages or dissolved by 2 and 5 years of start of union by age of woman

	Married 2 years	5 years	Dissolved 2 years	5 years
Sweden				
1964 *	8	34	16	37
1954	19	44	10	24
Norway				
1960 *	27	56	16	35
1950	64	81	8	29
Finland				
25-29	33	60	11	31
35-39	45	66	8	21
France				
25-29	20	34	11	27
35-39	40	59	7	22
Great Britain				
25-29	34	58	14	36
35-39	29	50	21	41
Austria				
25-29	26	54	7	26
35-39	31	50	6	18
Switzerland				
25-29	36	67	14	38
35-39	37	70	9	26
West Germany				
25-29	30	57	14	36
35-39	32	51	7	17
East Germany				
25-29	26	42	8	27
35-39	20	26	6	15
Latvia				
25-29	67	79	29	43
35-39	74	79	10	33

\*Birth cohorts

Table 10: Relative risk of marital dissolution in first marriage (which is a first partnership) according to whether woman cohabited prior to marriage or not amongst women aged 20 to 39 years at the time of the survey. Relative risks derived from Cox models. Model 1 has no controls, Model 2 includes controls for age at first marriage, church attendance and experience of parental divorce.

	Model 1	Model 2
Country		
Sweden	1.40	1.58*
Norway (a)	0.90	0.95
Finland	1.14	1.16
France (a)	1.59***	1.58***
Austria (a)	1.23	1.24
Switzerland	1.41*	1.28*
West Germany	1.62**	1.42**
East Germany	1.32*	1.38*
Latvia	1.13	1.12

Norway had no information on parental divorce and France and Austria had no question on religion.

\*\*\* p<0.0001 \*\* p<0.01 \* p<0.05

Table 11: Relative risk of marital dissolution in first marriage (which is a first partnership) according to whether woman cohabited prior to marriage and duration of cohabitation prior to marriage amongst women aged 20 to 39 years at the time of the survey. Relative risks derived from Cox models.

	France	Switzerland	Austria	West Germany	East Germany	Sweden
Duration of Cohabitation						
None	0.71*	0.65*	0.69+	0.72	0.89	0.71
1-6 months (reference category)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
7-12 months	1.20	1.08	0.68	1.66	1.29	1.33
13-24 months	0.89	0.84	1.11	1.17	1.25	1.10
25-36 months	1.31	0.94	0.53+	0.97	1.53	0.96
37-60 months	1.42	0.60	0.80	1.10	1.32	1.07
61 or more months	1.27	1.17	0.61	1.28	0.67	0.72

Table 12: Relative risk of partnership dissolution according to first partnership state for women aged 20 to 39 years at the time of the survey. Relative risks derived from Cox proportional hazard models with marriage included as a time varying co-variate. Model 1 no controls. Model 2 controls for age at first partnership, church attendance and experience of parental divorce.

	Model 1			Model 2		
	Married directly	Cohabited -married	All Cohabitation	Married directly	Cohabited -married	All Cohabitation
Country						
Sweden	1.00	1.61*	4.48***	1.00	1.50+	3.96***
Norway (a)	1.00	0.86	5.28***	1.00	0.85	4.92***
Finland	1.00	1.02	3.22***	1.00	1.12	3.44***
France (a)	1.00	1.46***	1.82***	1.00	1.45***	1.83***
Austria (a)	1.00	1.11	3.50***	1.00	1.01	3.08***
Switzerland	1.00	1.30+	6.06***	1.00	1.11	4.84***
West Germany	1.00	1.59**	3.18***	1.00	1.38*	3.07***
East Germany	1.00	1.35*	1.44**	1.00	1.35*	1.55***
Latvia	1.00	1.12	2.99***	1.00	1.03	2.83***

Norway had no information on parental divorce and France and Austria had no question on religion.

\*\*\* p<0.0001 \*\* p<0.01 \* p<0.05 +p<0.10

Table 13: Relative risk of partnership dissolution according to experience of parental divorce and church attendance amongst women aged 20 to 39 years at the time of the survey. Relative risks derived from Cox proportional hazard models with marriage included as a time varying co-variate. Model 1and 2a shows gross effect. Model 1b and 2b includes controls for first partnership state, age at first partnership and either experience of parental divorce or church attendance.

		Parental Divorce				None Church Attendance
	Model 1a	Model 1b			Model 2a	Model 2b
Country						
Sweden	1.49***	1.33***			1.39***	1.14
Norway (a)	--	--			1.74***	1.22*
Finland	2.23***	1.85***			2.03***	1.71***
France (a)	1.39***	1.20*			--	--
Austria (a)	2.25***	1.90***			--	--
Switzerland	1.97***	1.62***			2.39***	1.70***
West Germany	2.02***	1.60***			2.06***	1.71***
East Germany	1.88***	1.82***			1.05	0.92
Latvia	1.44***	1.29*			0.96	0.88

Norway had no information on parental divorce and France and Austria had no question on religion.

\*\*\*

p<0.0001

\*\*

p<0.01

\*

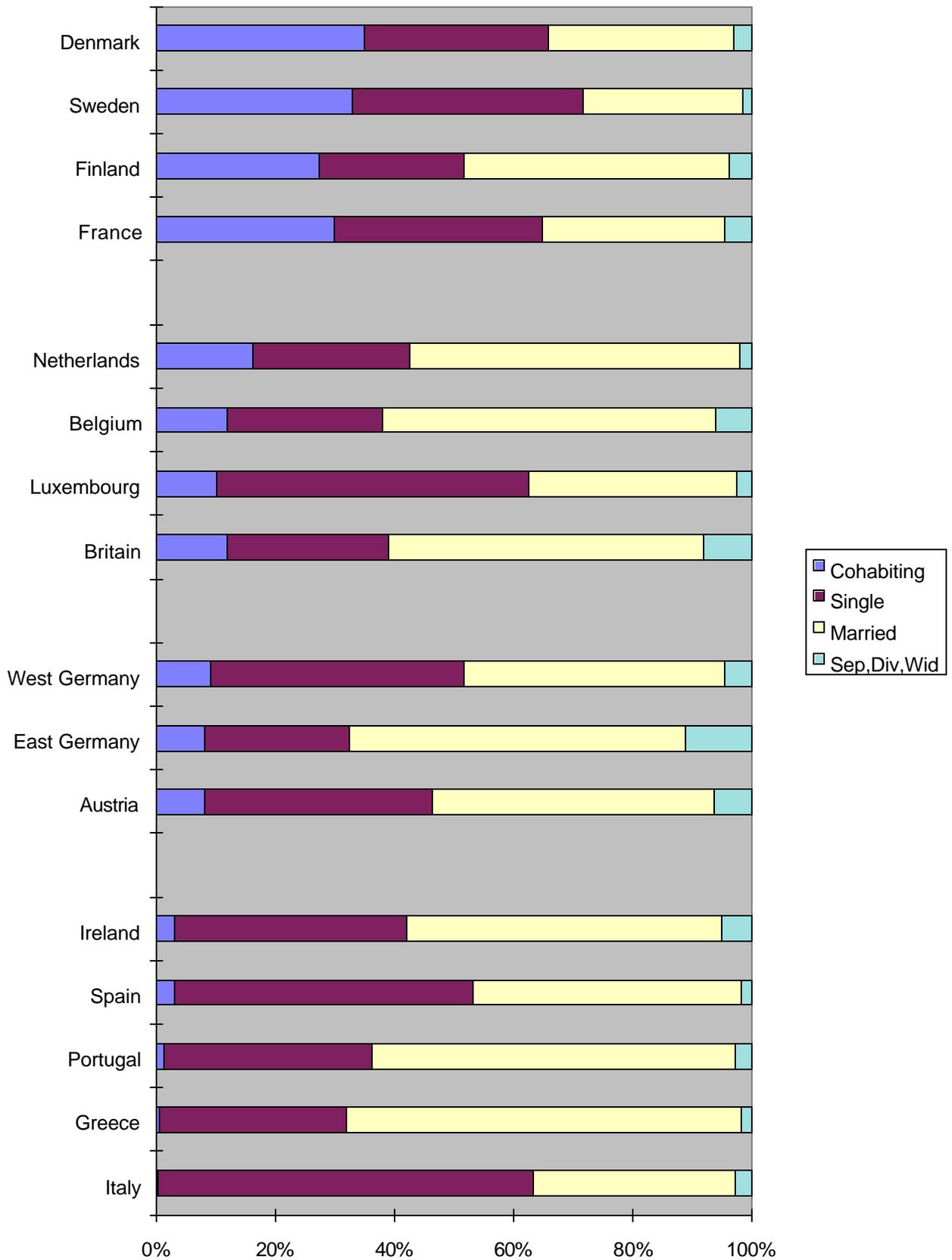
p<0.05

Table 14: Total Number of co-residential partnerships amongst women aged 35-39 years at the time of the survey

Percentage

	None	One	Two	Three or more
Country				
Sweden	4	71	20	6
Norway	4	81	13	2
Finland	4	77	16	3
France	7	69	21	3
Great Britain	4	73	18	5
Austria	6	77	14	3
Switzerland	3	78	16	3
West Germany	8	73	15	5
East Germany	5	74	17	4
Spain	4	90	6	1
Italy	9	87	4	0.1
Latvia	4	74	20	2
Lithuania	6	79	12	2
Hungary	4	80	13	3
Poland	11	86	3	--

### Marital Status Distribution of women aged 25-29 in 1996



Percentage of women with no partnership by age 25 by current age group

