

Fertility of married and unmarried couples in Europe

Elizabeth Brown and Alfred Dittgen

This paper is based on the results of 14 European FFS surveys¹: Austria, Belgium (Flemish region), Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland.

The purpose is to compare the fertility of married couples to that of the partners who are not married, either temporarily or definitively. In fact, we have focused on the situation of married women on the one hand, and cohabiting unmarried ones on the other, leaving out divorcees and widows, whose behaviour may be affected by the fact that they live with children born from a former union. Married women usually live with their husbands ; the partners of the unmarried ones may have been married once but are most often bachelors².

I. Methodological concerns

In the past, the connection between living as a couple and fertility was quite simple : marriage was the prelude to children's births. There were some pre-marital conceptions, but most of them led to marriage before the child's birth. The others would constitute illegitimate fertility, but this was a little part of the total fertility. Nowadays, the situation is more complex : many couples still follow the marriage-child-bearing sequence, but, besides, we find the cohabitation-marriage-child-bearing path or the cohabitation-child's birth-marriage one, or even the cohabitation-children's births one, without marriage.

In other words, among the married women we have considered, some got married directly, and some married after a time of cohabitation, before or after the children were born. In fact, we do not have to deal with two sharply distinct groups of women whose different characteristics would account for differences in fertility, as would be the case if for instance they were classified according to their social backgrounds ; these two groups can be considered as clearly distinguished only above the “normal” age at first marriage.

To avoid, as far as possible, the risks linked with the small numbers of unmarried couples observed in some surveys, we shall consider only two age-groups of women, those aged 20 to 29 and those aged 30 to 39. Many of the unmarried persons in the first group will certainly get married in the future, while a great number of those belonging to the second group will remain simple cohabitants.

The fertility differences between these two types of couples, in terms of average number of children born, result first from the different proportions of fertile couples – those who have started a family- , second from the different family-sizes. Therefore, besides the average number of children, our fertility indicators will be the proportion of fertile couples and the average number of children per fertile couple as well³.

II. Fertility differences among the couples with a 30-39-year-old woman

In table 1, the countries are ordered by decreasing proportions of cohabitation among the 30-39-year-old women. In the southern and eastern countries, Slovenia excepted, the

¹ When we began our work the files of these 14 countries were available, plus one for Poland, but in this survey, merely a few unmarried couples are included, and no significant results can be drawn out of them.

² We shall speak of married and cohabiting couples or married and cohabiting women.

level of cohabitation is low⁴; in the northern and western countries and in Slovenia, it varies greatly, but it is quite high in Sweden.

Table 1. Fertility in couples with a 30-39 -year-old woman in different European countries.
Percentage and number of couples with an unmarried woman ;
Average number of children per couple, percentage of fertile couples
And average size of families in married and unmarried couples

Country	Couples with an unmarried woman		Average number of children per couple			Percentage of fertile couples			Average size of families		
	%	number	Unmarried woman (1)	married woman (2)	(1)/(2) %	unmarried woman (1)	married woman (2)	(1)/(2) %	unmarried woman (1)	married woman (2)	(1)/(2) %
Surveys with more than 30 couples with an unmarried woman											
Sweden	23,1	236	1,56	2,20	71	82	94	86	1,91	2,34	82
France	11,0	181	1,15	2,21	52	69	94	83	1,68	2,34	72
Finland	10,0	122	0,76	1,95	39	48	91	53	1,58	2,15	73
Austria	8,9	87	0,76	1,83	42	53	91	58	1,43	2,00	71
Switzerland	8,0	66	0,25	1,87	13	17	87	20	1,47	2,15	68
Slovenia	7,3	74	1,28	1,94	66	85	97	88	1,50	2,00	75
Germany	5,9	110	0,66	1,78	37	45	90	50	1,47	1,97	75
Norway	5,6	58	0,84	2,14	39	60	95	63	1,40	2,25	62
Belgium Fl.	2,9	54	0,48	1,91	25	29	92	31	1,67	2,07	81
Surveys with less than 30 couples with an unmarried woman											
Latvia	2,8	19	1,11	1,98	56	74	96	77	1,50	2,06	73
Spain	2,4	27	0,99	1,84	54	59	93	63	1,67	1,97	85
Italy	1,8	22	0,85	1,65	52	61	91	67	1,39	1,82	76
Hungary	1,3	18	1,28	1,99	64	61	96	64	2,09	2,07	101
Lithuania	0,9	6	1,43	1,85	77	86	95	91	1,67	1,94	86

For married couples, the family-size is around two children, with markedly higher values in France and Sweden (2,34) and a lower one in Italy (1,82). The average number of children per married couple shows slightly wider differences, since in France and Sweden the proportion of fertile couples (94%) is in the upper range, and in Italy it is in the lower (91%). So, in France and Sweden, the family-size is 29% higher than in Italy, and the average number of children per couple is 34% higher.

³ In the tables, we put as well the proportion of couples with an unmarried woman, among the two types taken into account, and their number, which makes the observed differences significant or not.

⁴ The number of cohabitant couples is under 30 in these countries, which makes it difficult to establish significant comparisons.

The proportions of fertile couples among the married ones range from 91 to 97%, except in Switzerland (87%). Considering sterility cases are unavoidable, all the more so since child-bearing is often postponed, the values around 95% are evidence of a quite universal wish for children, which is however less obvious in countries with lower proportions, especially in Switzerland.

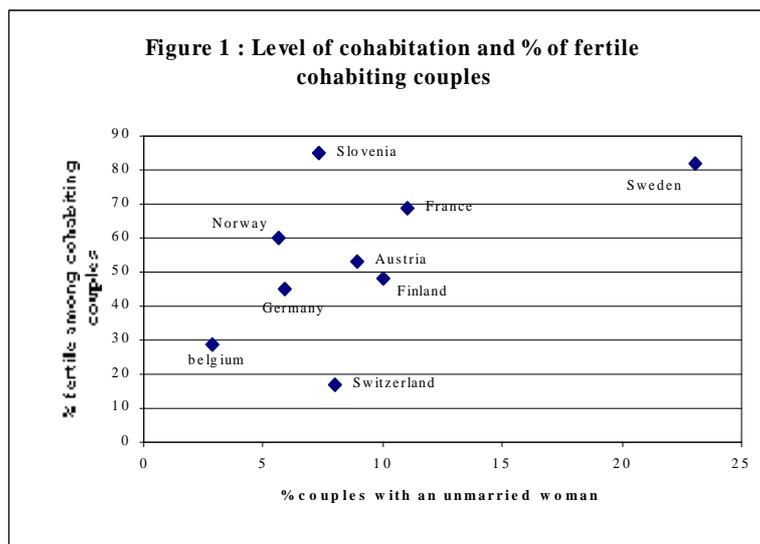
In the countries where cohabitation is widespread, the average number of children is always lower in cohabiting couple than in married ones, and the ratio varies greatly : from about 2/3 in Sweden and Slovenia, to one half in France, about 40% in Austria, Germany, Finland and Norway, only 25% in Flemish Belgium and twice less in Switzerland. These variations partly come from the different family-sizes, but even more so from the gaps in proportions of fertile couples among the cohabitants. In fact, though the ratio of family-size between cohabiting and married couples ranges from 62 to 82%, the frequency of the cohabiting who have at least one child is spread from almost 9 out of 10 in Slovenia to less than 2 out of 10 in Switzerland.

In the countries with a low cohabitation level, the situation is similar : the average number of children per cohabiting couple goes from one half of the married couples score in Italy, or a little more in Spain and Latvia, to two thirds in Hungary and three quarters in Lithuania. As in the former cases, these cohabitants have children less often than the married couples, and when they do, the score is lower⁵.

Is this great variation in the proportions of fertile couples in the different countries linked with the frequency of cohabitation ? In other words, is it easier for cohabitants to

⁵ Except from Hungary, but this result may not be significant, due to the small number of cohabiting couples observed.

have children when they are numerous, i.e. when this situation is common, and vice versa ? Figure 1 shows that the proportion of fertile cohabiting couples more or less increases together with the level of cohabitation in the nine countries where this way of life is more frequent, except in Slovenia and Switzerland. These two countries have a similar level of cohabitation, but in the first one, cohabitants' fertility is close to the Swedish figure, and in the second one it is very low.



III. Fertility differences among the couples with a 20-29-year-old woman

Table 2 shows the same indicators as table 1, but for couples with a 20-29-years-old woman ; the countries are ordered by decreasing proportions of cohabitation at this time of life. This way of life is more widespread in this age-group than in the older one, in every country. In the northern and western countries, except from Flemish Belgium, a quarter to two thirds of the couples are cohabiting ones. Do these higher levels result from a generation effect, meaning that the younger generations will get married less frequently, or from an age-effect, meaning that they cohabit for a while before getting married ? Probably both : postponed marriage for a part, and marriage refusal for another.

Table 2. Fertility in couples with a 20-29-year-old woman
in different European countries.
Percentage and number of couples with an unmarried woman ;
Average number of children per couple, percentage of fertile couples
And average size of families in married and unmarried couples

Country	Couples with an unmarried woman		Average number of children per couple			Percentage of fertile couples			Average size of families		
	%	number	Unmarried woman (1)	married woman (2)	(1)/(2) %	unmarried woman (1)	Married woman (2)	(1)/(2) %	unmarried woman (1)	married woman (2)	(1)/(2) %
Surveys with more than 30 couples with an unmarried woman											
Sweden	56,4	494	0,53	1,48	36	39	80	49	1,36	1,84	74
Austria	43,5	304	0,37	1,26	29	31	80	39	1,21	1,58	76
	42,5	383	0,43	1,23	35	33	70	47	1,31	1,68	78
France											
Finland	40,7	299	0,31	1,23	25	21	73	29	1,52	1,69	90
Norway	38,5	366	0,50	1,36	37	40	79	51	1,25	1,74	72
Switzerland	36,5	203	0,05	0,99	5	5	64	8	1,10	1,55	71
Germany	22,4	378	0,20	1,31	15	17	79	22	1,19	1,65	72
Slovenia	22,2	130	0,79	1,43	55	64	91	70	1,24	1,56	79
Belgium Fl.	14,0	143	0,17	0,93	18	14	59	24	1,19	1,57	76
Latvia	12,9	55	0,60	1,28	47	47	87	54	1,27	1,47	86
Spain	10,3	59	0,31	1,05	30	24	70	34	1,29	1,49	87
Hungary	6,7	64	0,50	1,34	37	33	84	39	1,52	1,59	96
Surveys with less than 30 couples with an unmarried woman											
Italy	4,4	25	0,22	0,96	23	15	68	22	1,45	1,43	101
Lithuania	3,1	20	0,55	1,16	47	40	82	49	1,38	1,41	98

Among the married couples, family-size is the highest in Sweden, with 1,84 children, and the lowest in Lithuania, with 1,41 children. Between Sweden and Italy, the gap of 29% is the same as in the older group ; but it goes up to 54% when the average number of children is taken into account, respectively 1,48 and 0,96 children : in fact, in Italy there are only two fertile couples out of three in this age-group, compared with four out of five in Sweden. These differences might be ascribed to a postponed fertility period in Italy, but since they are similar to the results observed among the 30-39 women, they more likely show intensity rather than calendar differences.

For the cohabitants, family-size is always more than two thirds of the married one, this ratio is higher than among the 30-39-year-old women. On the contrary, the proportions

of fertile couples are much lower here, always under 50%, except for Slovenia with 64% ; in Switzerland it is only 5%.

Indeed, what we find here is two different types of cohabitants : those who build or wish to build a family just like married people, though they neglect or refuse to get married ; and those who merely live together, at least for the time being. The ratio between the two types changes greatly from one country to another, and, as for the older group, it is not clearly linked with the frequency of cohabitation : of course, the first type is more present in the northern countries or in Austria and France, where cohabitation is widespread, than in Flemish Belgium where it is rather rare. But on the other hand, the family-building type is the majority among the cohabitants in Slovenia, though they are not so numerous, while it is hardly to be found in Switzerland, where cohabitation is more frequent.

IV. Differences in family structures.

Table 3 shows two indicators in order to shed better light on the variations in family-sizes between married and unmarried couples : the proportions of families with one child, and with three or more children, the large families, among the 30-39-year-old women.

As to married couples, Sweden and Italy keep their opposite situations, concerning both small families and large ones. In Italy, more than one third of the fertile couples (36%) have only one child, which is much more than elsewhere ; in Sweden the proportion is the lowest, only 14%, and in the other countries it usually ranges from 20 to 25%. On the other hand, Sweden turns out to have the highest proportion of large families (38%), just before France (33%), and Italy has the lowest (15%).

Table 3. Family size in married and unmarried couples with a 30-39-year-old woman in different European countries
Percentage of families with one child and with three or more children.

Country	Number of fertile couples With an unmarried woman	Percentage of families with one child			Percentage of families with three or more children		
		Unmarried woman (1)	Married woman (2)	(1)/(2)	Unmarried woman (1)	Married woman (2)	(1)/(2) %
Surveys with more than 30 couples with an unmarried woman							
Sweden	192	31	14	2,2	19	38	50
France	144	50	20	2,4	15	33	45
Slovenia	65	60	20	3,0	*	17	
Finland	59	51	22	2,3	*	28	
Germany	57	67	27	2,5	13	20	
Austria	53	64	25	2,6	*	20	
Norway	35	63	15	4,2	*	30	
Surveys with less than 30 couples with an unmarried woman							
Belgium Fl.R.	15	42	25	1,7	*	24	
Spain	16	58	26	2,2	*	17	
Latvia	14	57	25	2,3	*	23	
Italy	13	71	36	2,0	*	15	
Switzerland	12	62	21	3,0	*	28	
Hungary	11	36	20	1,8	*	20	
Lithuania	6	50	26	1,9	*	16	

* not significant

Regarding cohabiting couples, families with one child are much more frequent than among married ones, from two to four times. On the contrary, large families are twice less frequent in Sweden or in France, and even less in the other countries, though the figures are not significant there.

Conclusions

In all the countries considered, the fertility of cohabiting couples is lower than that of married couples, but this does not mean much in so far as some cohabitants behave in a way close to that of married people, and others do not at all. The former have children, but fewer than married people do ; the latter may just be delaying marriage and procreation.

A link between the level of cohabitation and the proportion of fertility couples among the cohabitants has been noticed but it is not systematic.

But, if we return to the tables, three groups of countries can be distinguished. In the first one, where cohabitation is widespread and most cohabitants behave similarly to married people, we find France and Sweden. In the second one, quite unlike the first, cohabitation is rather unusual and the cohabitants have a very low fertility; here is Italy and Flemish Belgium too. In the third one, which includes all the other countries save Slovenia and Switzerland, cohabitation is moderately frequent and sometimes on the rise, but the differences in fertility between married and cohabitant couples are higher than in the first group. Slovenia and Switzerland are special cases; in Slovenia cohabitation is moderately frequent and cohabitants behave similarly to married people, and in Switzerland we find more frequent cohabitation and very few children for cohabitants.

Flagship conference

A comparison between the fertility of married and unmarried couples

Paper outlines

Elizabeth Brown and Alfred Dittgen

In Europe, simple cohabitation is increasingly replacing marriage, as a more or less long-term way of life. This leads us to wonder whether cohabiting couples only differ from married couples because of their legal status or because of their behaviour as well, especially concerning procreation. This paper will try to answer the question by comparing the fertility of married women and of cohabiting single women, aged 20 to 39, in 15 European countries which took part in the FFS of the nineteen nineties.

In only 9 of these 15 countries, located in northern and western Europe, is the frequency of cohabitation high enough to allow a comparison of the levels of fertility in the two groups. Cohabiting women's fertility is always lower than married ones'. Two explanations account for the difference : women of the first group do not start a family as often as their married counterparts, and, when they do, they have fewer children; the major difference lies in the fact of having a family or not.

Unmarried partnership is the most frequent in France and in Sweden and that is where the levels of fertility of married and unmarried couples are the closest . In the other countries, there is no specific link between the level of cohabitation and the fertility of cohabiting women. For instance, in Switzerland, the latter is close to zero while the former is quite frequent.

These differences in fertility between married and unmarried women are not easy to explain. Among the young women, especially the 20-24-year-old, the gap is wider, and it is undoubtedly mostly due to the fact that unmarried women become mothers later than married ones– some of them even waiting to be married for having a child.

Among the older women, the 30-34-year-old group, the gap still exists but it becomes smaller. At these ages when the prospects of getting married are little, the differences show that we are faced with at least three types of population with their own behaviour concerning procreation: first, the married partners who almost all have a fertility plan ; second, a part of the cohabiting partners, usually a majority, who also have one, but including fewer children ; and third, the other part of the unmarried couples, those who merely want to live together.