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ensuring work-family balance;
advancing social integration and intergenerational solidarity
in Europe”**

**Work, fertility and the transition to parenthood:
Trends and their impact on work and family agenda**

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Major societal trends related to the family continued their general course during the first decade of this Century: fertility remained low; new family forms are on the rise; the work and family dilemma continues as a riddle with many solutions apparently not effective; young adults' life course is condensed with crucial life events. This development however holds its specific aspects for different time periods that imply specific policy-related implications. This paper presents a brief description of trends and issues related to the work-life dilemma of contemporary families. A specific feature of contemporary life is the economic recession in the European countries which are in the focus of the present analysis.

A. Fertility

Recent and current fertility change in the European countries is characteristic with two major trends: the rebound of fertility and the effect of the recession on fertility.

1. Rebound of fertility

Fig. 1 describes the fertility trends observed as of 1990 in several sub-regions in Europe. While fertility (measured with the total fertility rate) declined all throughout Europe during the 1990-s and lowest points were observed around the turn of the Century, during the recent decade it increased in all countries with few exceptions such as Portugal.

How can this rebound be explained? During the recent 3-4 decades and as of the start of the transition in Central and Eastern Europe, births have been postponed to later ages in life. During the run of postponement, period measures of fertility such as the TFR are depressed downwards. The fertility level at the end of the reproductive life however is not affected by postponement. Hence changes in fertility measures such as the TFR can be due partially to this postponement effect along with actual decline in the level of fertility.

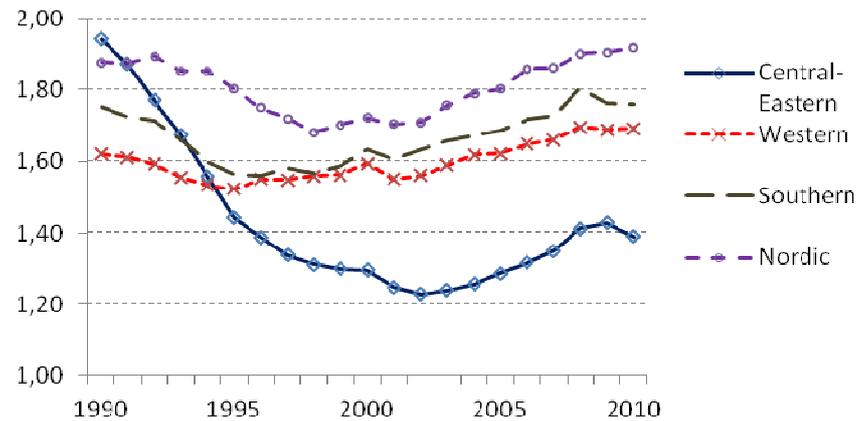


Fig. 1: Total fertility rate in regions of Europe; EU member countries only (source: Eurostat and Human Fertility Database)

Postponement of births to later ages of life cannot last for ever. When its effect will be exhausted it will not further depress the values of the TFR and the TFR will rise. Analytical work shows that (Goldstein et al. 2009, Bongaarts and Sobotka 2011) a major reason for the rebound is namely the decline of the fertility postponement effect. To this end use is made of an adjustment of the TFR that accounts for the postponement effect. Fig. 2 illustrates these changes in the case of Spain.

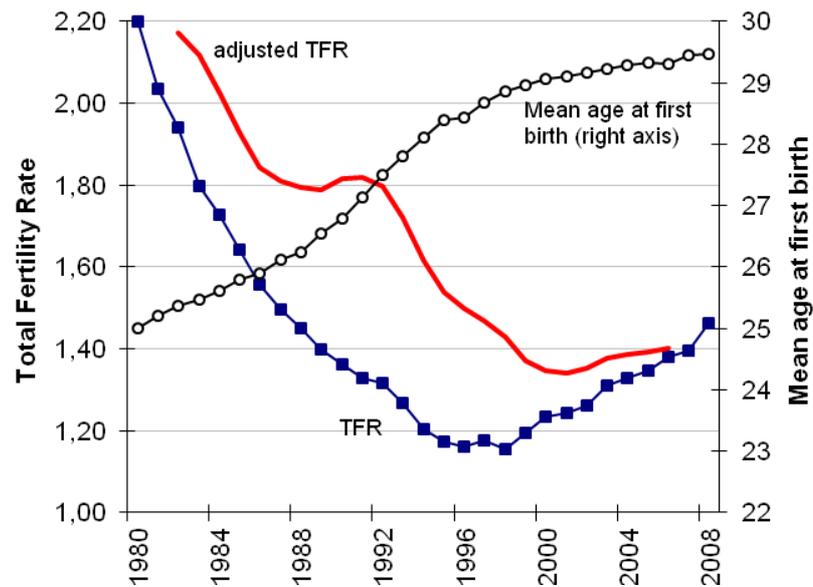


Fig. 2: TFR, adjusted TFR, and mean age at first birth: Spain 1980-2008 (source: VID-IIASA European Datasheet 2010)

The figure shows that the TFR declined significantly till the second half of the 1990s and thereafter started to increase. The mean age at first birth illustrates postponement (similar curves for mean ages at higher births are not included in the graph): it increased considerably during the time of decline of the TFR but this increase turned moderate later. As a consequence the adjusted TFR is considerably higher than the actual TFR all throughout the period, but the difference declined during the last decade and is about to disappear towards the decade's end. I.e. postponement extinguishes and the observed TFR resumes higher values. Fertility level in Spain as indicated by the adjusted TFR has never been below 1.3 and was only for a couple of years below 1.4.

The rise in the mean age at first birth is indicative also about a postponement of the entry into parenthood: a crucial topic in contemporary social research and policies.

2. Effect of the recession: rebound of postponement?

Fig. 1 shows that during the last couple of years before 2010 the rise in fertility in some regions declined and even a fall in fertility has been observed – particularly in the countries

situated in Central-Eastern Europe (countries in transition). This change comes during the rebound. The effect of the recession is known to influence mainly timing of births, i.e. it has a postponement effect (Sobotka et al. 2011). Thus the effect of the recession on fertility is to renew postponement of births.

3. Do policies have an effect?

The decline in fertility till the turn of the Century was considered as negative by many European governments. According to a UN enquiry carried out in 2009 (United Nations 2011), 27 governments in Europe evaluated the fertility trends in their country as “too low”, and only 13 assessed them as “satisfactory”. 30 governments stated they perform policy related to fertility: 25 with the purpose to “raise” it, and 5 to “maintain” its level. Only 9 governments preferred “no intervention”. Many governments followed with practical action: family policy instruments were being changed with the purpose to alleviate barriers to childbearing.

Frequently the rise in fertility observed during the second half of the decade is explained with these policies. Academic research indicates however that the fertility rebound is explained with the decline in postponement. Hence policies have a minor effect on the level of fertility. It can only be argued that policies might have encouraged young families to have their children earlier in life; therefore their effect is on timing of births and hardly on their quantity. This effect seems also to have been lost during the years of the recession, moreover because under the economic pressure some governments (eg. in Spain) decreased funding support to families.

B. Postponement: an outcome of the work-family dilemma

The work-family dilemma is by and large a problem of time-use. Young adults must take decisions about a sequence of crucial life events such as completion of education, starting work, leaving the parental home, starting an own family, having children. These events are condensed within a short time interval (frequently referred to as “the rush hours of life”) and they compete for the time of the individual. One solution to this “competition” is to postpone some of the events to later age: particularly those which are strongly bounding or irreversible, such as entry into a marriage or becoming a parent. This rational decision-taking under existing constraints defines the run of contemporary changes around the family. For example, cohabitation is not as bounding as marriage and hence it can be preferred as a temporary family form that precedes the more bounding marriage. As a consequence, a successful cohabitation may remain as a long-standing family form of the couple.

A diversity of social policies instruments aim to alleviate the work-family conflict along these events. A significant aspect of these policies has only rarely been discussed: helping

individuals not to postpone important decisions to later age. This aspect of policies is known as “tempo” policies (Lutz and Skirrbekk 2005). Tempo policies aim to achieve compatibility among events in terms of time use, so that individuals can have increased choices to parallel courses in life. An example of such a policy instrument is the encouragement of kindergartens and crèches in universities and in large-scale working enterprises which is a parallel between education or work on one side and childrearing on the other. Tempo policies have a considerable potential and their enhancement can have a marked contribution to the alleviation of the work-family dilemma.

Time use is not the only reason for postponement. There exist at least two other reasons: poverty and uncertainty in life.

Poor people feel they do not dispose with the resources necessary to achieve certain aims in their life, such as own dwelling, higher education, or having children. Under the pressure exercised by financial and material constraints individuals are forced to postpone some of their preferred life events until later in life and focus on those means that will help them achieve these aims. Primary means are working for pay and therefore individuals prefer work to family-related events. Apparently conditions of employability can change similar arrangements. Alleviating problems related to the family in similar cases needs other than tempo policies and they related to issues such as employment, training, financial support.

Uncertainty is another reason for postponement of crucial life events. Uncertainty has been recently on the increase for a diversity of reasons. Specifically in the ex-socialist countries in Central and Eastern Europe it was due to the difficulties that young adults experienced during the transition period. At present this aspect of increase in uncertainty is not as significant as it has been until only a couple of years ago. Another aspect of uncertainty in these countries was due to the large increase in the set of alternatives for arranging one’s life that increased enormously with the transition to a democratic regime. Making proper choices in a large set of alternatives requires a detailed knowledge of the consequences of this decision-taking; however in times of dynamic societal change these consequences are not easy to assess and hence dynamics of change causes rise in uncertainty.

All over Europe similar development of uncertainty is discussed as being caused by rising globalization (Blossfeld and Mills 2010). Globalizations opens new markets, opportunities for travel, enhances communications, etc., which brings new opportunities for choices to young adults. Facing these opportunities they might decide to postpone bounding events such as marriage or having a child.

A proper way to view the effect of policies where uncertainty is considered is providing means that lead to a decline in uncertainty. One powerful way is increase in information through mass media, specialized bureaus and other ways for transfer of information to the population.

C. The work-family interface

Young adults react to competing life paths with postponement of crucial and irreversible life events. This section provides a brief review of the environment in which the work-family dilemma is observed. One component of this environment is globalization of contemporary societies which was discussed above. Other components refer to women's preferences and the dominant gender model in society.

The "theory of preferences" as it is known (Hakim 2001) posits that according to their preferences to choose between a working career and family care women can be categorized in three groups. The first group includes women who definitely prefer family care to a working career; the second group includes women who definitely prefer career to family work and the third group refers to undecided women whose preferences are not clearly demonstrated. The three groups are approximately equal in magnitude, i.e. one third of all women in each group. The main policy implication from the theory of preferences is that policies that refer to the work-family dilemma should target women from the third group as these policies will be ineffective where women from the other two groups are considered. Hakim's results have been debated but the general inferences mentioned here have gained support.

Gender issues are a significant background of the prevalent work-family relations. The traditional breadwinner model where the man works and the woman cares for the family is not dominating anymore and continues giving ground to a contemporary model where both partners work and both care for the family. Yet participation in family care is strongly biased towards women who do the bulk of the household labour. Thus women feel the burden of work for pay and work at home at a greater extent than men do.

Governments have done a great deal towards supporting a division of labour at work and in the household. The legal system in most of the countries is not a significant obstacle through the practical implementation of gender mainstreaming. However, problems of gender equity remain particularly where women take the bulk of the household work: there exists a conflict between a contemporary legal system on one side and traditional social norms to family care, on the other. This conflict is observed mainly in Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe (McDonalds 2000). This conflict is stated as an important explanation of low fertility in these countries.

D. Work and the family in contemporary social life

This section focuses on education and employment as well as on new family forms.

1. Education

It is a primary reason for the postponement of entry into parenthood. In most of the European countries the proportion of women that attain university education is higher than that for men. Women prefer more humanitarian and social disciplines, i.e. there exist some gender-specific preferences to higher education. While being in education women prefer to postpone having babies to the times when education will be completed. This relation is however quite loose in the Nordic countries where policies support students in childrearing. These policies refer to the tempo-policies mentioned above. It is likely to expect that they can be effective in other countries as well. A specific feature of education in the Nordic countries is that higher education is completed at a relatively higher age at life.

During the period 2001-2009 the number of students in tertiary education in the EU-27 has increased by three million: from 16.1 to 19 million. A further steep increase is expected in the future. The 2020 Strategy of the European Union sets a specific target with respect to education: “at least 40% of 30-34-year-olds completing third level education”. A proportion of 40% is high for countries like Italy and Austria as well as for a range of other countries so increase in these countries is expected to be faster. Higher education will continue to increase and therefore this incentive for postponement of entry into parenthood will be here to stay. Adequate tempo-related policies need further enhancement.

2. Women in labour

According to Eurostat data (based on the labour force surveys) employment in the active population aged 15 and higher has increased significantly till 2008 when it reached a quota of 58.9% for females and 72.7 for males. During the years after 2007 the recession caused a decline in employment for both sexes. The decline was steeper for men than for the women because men are dominant in the sectors most strongly affected by the recession: construction and industries. Yet the data for 2011 mark a slight increase.

Increase in labour force participation rates among women has been observed during the last couple of decades in many countries in Europe. Academic research points out that this increase has been negatively correlated with fertility until 0-15 years ago but recently it has turned non-negative if not positive. The figure below describes these changes for the OECD countries.

A regression line across countries and the level of total fertility rates has had a negative slope in 1980. In 2009 no line is given as the data are not accordingly distributed: If Mexico were removed from the figure a line with a positive slope could have been received with a lineal regression.

Hence there is a reversal in the correlation between fertility and employment: they have become less incompatible towards 2009 as compared with past years. Researchers explain this change with the rise in services and support provided by family and other social policies which have alleviated the conflict in the time use for the family and for work. OECD (2011) provides a detailed analysis of these policies.

One trend that led to the decline in this incompatibility is the high level of part-time employment of women. In 2007 nearly every third woman (31.2%) in the EU 27 was working part-time while for the men this percent is 7.8 points. Apparently part-time labour-force occupation gives increased possibilities for childcare. Part-time is a convenient alternative to full-time employment for women who can be classified as “undecided” in the preferences classification discussed above. Notably part-time participation of women has increased by 1 point during the last couple of years, apparently under the impact of the recession.

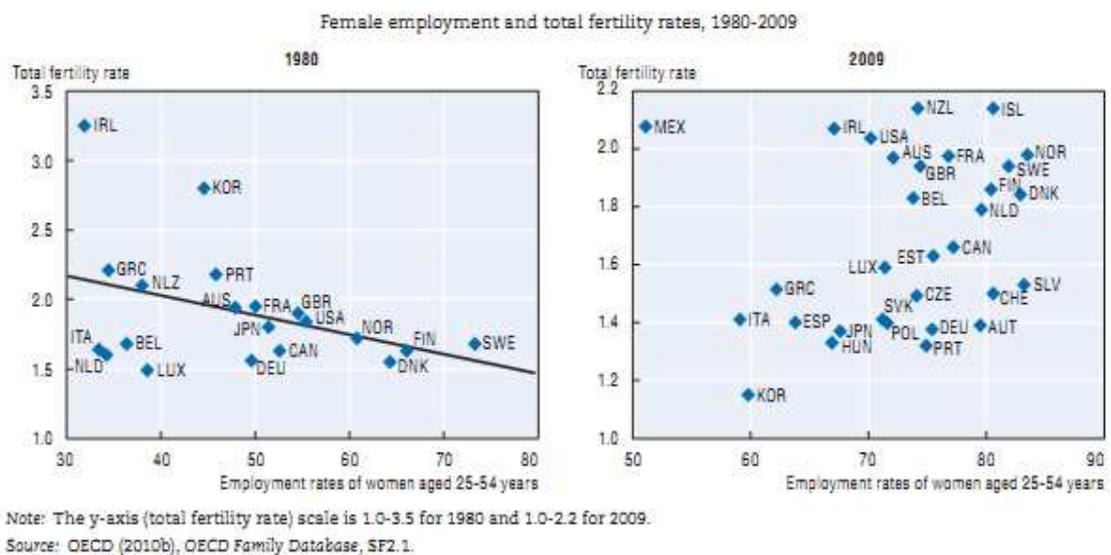


Fig. 3: Female employment and total fertility rates, 1980 and 2009 (source: Fig.3.8 in OECD, 2011)

3. Families in transition

A traditional family includes two married parents and at least one child. Although the term “family” has its legal definition, in practice it is used for a variety of forms that derive from the classical one:

- A couple without children. Childless families are on the rise particularly in countries situated in Central Europe (Germany and Austria), where social norms are tolerant towards not being a parent. There is evidence that some Eastern European countries may soon be included in this group. In other countries such as in Southern Europe and some countries on the Balkans and Eastern Europe the social expectation that everyone should be a parent is strong and hence childlessness is rare. An important policy implication is that where childlessness is a concern, policy-makers should be aware of the role that social norms might play.
- Single parent with at least one child. The single parent is usually a mother. The proportion of these families has been increasing. These families are vulnerable from economic point of view because the mother’s income can be insufficient for the maintenance of a reasonable well-being of the family.
- Cohabiting couple with or without children. This type of family has become common in most of the European countries, with some exception in countries where religiosity is relatively strong (Poland, Ireland, Italy). Cohabitation is frequently a prelude to a marriage and it serves as a way to enjoy the common life with a close person without taking risks in an uncertain world. Cohabitation has become common under the pressure of recent ideational changes that push towards a higher female autonomy. Contemporary legal systems in Europe have reflected this family type.
- Single-sex families. Still statistically rare, these families are on the increase as tolerance to uncommon behaviour has increased across European populations.
- Families of foreigners. These families refer to a couple that is of a foreign origin in the country of residence. Statistics shows that these families are unaccepted and socially excluded by the local population – a clear field for policy action.

E. Work and family: a broader view with respect to policy implications

This section outlines additional considerations that are important in shaping policies relevant to the work-family conflict.

1. Are more children desired?

The work-family dilemma steps on the assumption that couples want to have children but involvement in labour is an obstacle to meeting their desires. The assumption has been recently analysed in detail for example under the framework of the FP7 project “REPRO” (www.repro-project.org). The ideal number of children for Europeans is about 2.1 while fertility is considerably higher. The difference is known as the “fertility gap” and it is assumed to indicate the need of policy action. Recent debates showed that this measurement is crude (Philipov and Bernardi 2012), yet the idea is useful and needs elaboration.

The idea developed in REPRO is the following. First, information should be gathered about fertility intentions to have a child within a short period of time such as 2-3 years. Second, information about the fulfilment or frustration of these intentions should also be gathered with panel surveys several years later. Third, the reasons for frustration or fulfilment of intentions should be analysed for drawing policy implications. With the application of rigorous scientific theories this framework yields valuable and reliable policy-relevant information.

An important constituent of this approach is that intentions are analysed in their integrity. I.e., intentions not to have a child are also considered. Indeed, having children is a fundamental reproductive right: “Couples are free to decide the number and spacing of their children” as is stated in the Human Rights Declaration. Governments act to fulfil needs of families that want as well as needs of families that do not want to have children.

2. A syndrome of postponement?

The discussion in the preceding sections frequently described postponement of family formation as a dominating trend in contemporary young adults’ life course. Postponement of the birth of the first child has risen with several years during the last two decades. As a result the majority of young couples have their children considerably later than their parents. Entry into parenthood has become a dominating pattern of behaviour that has spread through contemporary societies as a social norm. This pattern is named by some scientists as “syndrome” because it originated under the pressure of external obstacles rather than as a free choice.

3. Value of children?

Individuals usually solve their work-family dilemma with the postponement of childbearing and specifically with a later entry into parenthood. As discussed this is a rational choice as having children is an irreversible and crucial event as compared to other events such as

work and education. Yet, why couples do not decide to give up these other events and enjoy a happy life with children? Apparently the joy and satisfaction that children bring is not dominating over the achievements reached with higher education and well paid job. This comparison confronts values: the values of children with the values related to work and career. Studies on this topic are not frequent and need reinforcement. Some researchers find that policies and the media can turn towards explaining the high value of children for a family and thus help couples decide that having children brings not less joy than a working career (Esping-Adersen 2010).

F. Policy recommendations

Policies that aim to increase fertility are frequently termed as pronatalistic. I exclude this policy approach from my recommendations. Instead, the following simple scheme can be followed.

- First, analytical research should examine people's intentions to have a/another child and follow whether this intention has been fulfilled or remained frustrated.
- Second, delineate those obstacles that prevented people from fulfilling their intention. Identify obstacles that can be subject to policy action.
- Identify appropriate policy tools that will alleviate the effect of these obstacles.
 - It is important to note that the same scheme applies also in the case when intentions not to have a/another child are frustrated, i.e. when people have unplanned pregnancies. This case is however under detailed monitoring by family planning policies so I do not consider it here.
 - This approach directs policies towards alleviation of obstacles that people meet. It does not directly incur pronatalism.
 - A major group of obstacles that prevent people from fulfilling their family size desires refers to the work-family dilemma. As discussed above this dilemma is by and large a product of competing time paths. Therefore a promising way to policy-making is to help people run parallel life courses, i.e. the recommendation is to organize and proceed with "tempo" policies which were mentioned above. Examples:
 - Reconcile being in education with care for the family. Policies may encourage the spread of kindergartens in universities and higher schools.
 - Reconcile being at work and with care for the family. A diversity of policies are practiced here and their expansion is recommended: part-time work, kindergartens in large companies, supporting a nanny who cares about children while parents work, promoting a decline of the gendered division of labour in the family. Note should be taken that these policies will be less effective among women who are firmly destined to a working career, and redundant to women who are firmly destined to care about their families.

Last but not least, more attention should be turned towards the spread of new family forms. Some of them include families that need support, such as single-parent families and single (usually widowed) old persons.

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