

Social Diversity in Non-marital Childbearing in Various Gender Contexts

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Extended abstract for the 2015 meeting of the Population Association of America

The increase in non-marital childbearing over the last decades is one of the major changes in family behavior in industrialized societies. The consequences for child welfare and social diversity have received tremendous scholarly attention, in particular in publications by authors from the United States on the subject. They have argued that these changes in family formation patterns contribute to make links between social disadvantage and family structure even more relevant than in the past (Wu and Wolfe 2001; McLanahan 2004). Given the rather high rate of teenage births in the United States (also in comparison to Europe), non-marital childbearing has often been related to fertility outside a co-resident relationship, frequently unintended and at young maternal age. It is indeed a consistent finding across a vast amount of studies that early childbearing (outside a co-resident union) is associated with socioeconomic disadvantage (Jones et al. 1985; Udadhya and Ellen 2011; Ventura, Hamilton, and Mathews 2013). The increasing postponement of first births observed in many industrialized societies may exacerbate socio-economic differentials of non-marital versus marital families. This calls for more research about the association between socio-economic background and non-marital childbearing in different contexts.

Our study focuses on possible differences *across space and time* in Europe. We compare first and higher-order births in different relationship types: singlehood, cohabitation and marriage. The extent to which the social diversity of childbearing in different union types is related to social disadvantage and thus a polarization of life chances for children born to unmarried, cohabiting and married women may depend on the country context in which these children are born, in particular with regard to women's opportunities to secure their own livelihood and their freedom to choose between different family forms. European countries differ in gender equality, hence in the extent to which men and women hold similar roles in the family and work domain. The aim of this paper is to provide more insights into how different dimensions of gender equality in a country may be related to the social diversity in non-marital childbearing.

Background

In the European context the increase in non-marital childbearing is predominantly due to a growing number of births within cohabitation (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Kiernan 2004; Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). While there is less cross-country variation in births to single mothers there is substantial variance in the significance of births within cohabitation in contrast to births to married and single mothers. Recent survey data show that 54% of all first births in Norway occur within cohabitation, 46% in France and 29% in the United Kingdom, while only 9% of first born children in Italy have cohabiting parents

(Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). Although it is clear that changes in non-marital fertility are intertwined with ongoing changes in the diffusion of cohabitation it is debated whether (having a child within) cohabitation is the expression of choice (i.e. related to individual preferences) or constraints (i.e. related to lacking access to marriage). Proponents of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) have argued that the rise of unmarried cohabitation is related to emancipation from traditional norms and rising economic autonomy of women (van de Kaa 2001). This finds support in a study that shows that women's education expansion was a key driver in the spread of childbearing within cohabitation in Norway (Vitali, Aassve and Lappegård, forthcoming). At the same time, on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean it has been found evidence that childbearing within cohabitation is associated with lower levels of educational attainment and linked to social disadvantage (Perelli-Harris et al. 2010; Kennedy and Bumpass 2008). In the European context, however this pattern of disadvantage has been found for first births, but not for higher-order births within cohabitation (Perelli-Harris 2014).

Over the last decades many modern societies have experienced substantial changes in gender roles, also referred to as a "gender revolution" (Goldscheider 2012). This process starts with a significant increase in the participation of women in the labor market and politics, followed by men taking over more responsibilities in household and family-related activities (Goldscheider 2012). The gender revolution would be completed if men and women were to participate equally in the labor market and to share equally household and family obligations. No country has yet completed the gender revolution, but many countries seem to be in the transition between the two stages. During this transition, societies may face uncertainties about gender roles and young men and women may have unclear expectations about what to expect from their partner. We believe that these ongoing couple dynamics underline the importance of investigating the social diversity in non-marital childbearing in light of the level of gender equality in a country.

Increasing gender equality is considered an important driving factor in the emergence of new family behavior (Bumpass 1990; Lesthaeghe 2010). The reasoning is that the empowerment and increased economic independence of women makes them less dependent on kin relations and thus reduces the gains of marriage (see also McLaughlin and Glendinning 1994). Such processes are also supported by the welfare state. Policies that facilitate combining work and family such as parental leave schemes and the expansion of child care as well as a stronger obligation for men to participate in childrearing activities (e.g. parental leave that can only be taken by the father of the child) contribute to the situation that women can remain economically independent of their partner when they have small children. Thus, women might view cohabitation as an appropriate setting for having children when they do not depend on marriage as an economic protection. For instance, Lappegård, Klüsener and Vignoli (2014) showed that in countries in which fewer people agreed that men should enjoy priority in access to labor when jobs are scarce, childbearing within cohabitation was more prevalent.

In this study, we focus on three contextual dimensions linked to gender equality that we believe make women less reliant on the institution of marriage and consequently contribute to increase the share of children born outside marriage. The gender context is a structuring element of all relationships in societies and is heavily shaped at the national level by welfare state policies and public opinion communicated through mass media. We expect to find differences in how women from different socio-economic background perceive and respond to the level of gender equality in their country. We aim at exploring differences between different dimensions of gender equality and women's socio-economic background in their association with childbearing. This is an important question as a specific national gender context may compensate for disadvantages across different social strata or by contrast exacerbate disparities between them in terms of outcomes of union- and family formation decisions. Potential mechanisms are lined out in the following paragraphs.

First, *women's autonomy* is one of the most important features of gender equality because it permits women to support themselves and their children (Neyer, Lappegård, and Vignoli 2013). What we describe as *women's autonomy* is measured as the proportion of women in employment at the country level and thus a proxy for dual-earner norms. In a country with higher dual-earner norms, women participate to a larger extent in the labor market which in turn makes them less economically dependent on kin relations than in countries where the male breadwinner ideal is dominating. As a result, women might be more likely to have children outside marriage. Women from a more disadvantaged socio-economic background might have internalized the dual-earner norm prevalent in their society, but nevertheless have less access to employment that makes them self-sustainable and independent from their partners' income. They may perceive social norms embracing dual-earnership simply as a necessity to make ends meet rather than a proxy of personal autonomy. Their lacking economic prospects might thus translate in a weaker association between women's autonomy at the country level and childbearing within cohabitation for the lower social strata compared to their higher educated counterparts.

Second, *women's relative income to men's* is defined as the ratio of the average gross income of men and women at the country level. Women's relative income is crucial in realizing gender equality in the private sphere (Neyer, Lappegård, and Vignoli 2013). This dimension complements the autonomy dimension because female employment may not be sufficient to capture gender equality when women are predominantly in employments in which they earn less than their male partners. Thus, as long as the male income remains the dominant income source of the household, women may not have the negotiation power to establish gender equality in the family sphere. These aspects might particularly play out among higher educated couples, where bigger income differences can emerge when e.g. one of the partners reduces the labor force participation in order to take over childrearing obligations.

Finally, we include the dimension *defamilisation* measured by the level of access to public childcare for children in pre-school age. Defamilisation captures the evolution of the welfare state which has made women more independent from kin-relations (McLaughlin and Glendinning 1994; Esping-Andersen 1999). Women from the lower social strata of a society may particularly benefit from social support schemes for unmarried mothers or social support in general. This may make them economically less dependent from the father of their child, especially when this man is also economically disadvantaged. For women from higher social strata, the existing support schemes might not be sufficient to ensure that they can keep their living standard even if they are not fully participating in the labor market due to childbearing obligations. They may thus prefer to marry in order to increase the likeliness that they can keep their living standard after entering motherhood.

Analytical strategy

We use survey data from 16 European countries (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Georgia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, and the Russian Federation) that have participated in the Generations and Gender Programme (GGP). The Generations and Gender Surveys (GGS) is a set of comparative surveys of a national representative sample of the 18 to 79 year old resident population (Vikat et al 2007). The overall size of the main samples differs by country but in most cases it is about 10,000 respondents. The overall response rate varies between 49.7% in Romania and more than 80% in Italy. The data contain complete fertility histories (resident and non-resident biological children from current and prior relationships) as well as union histories (cohabitations and marriages with some demographic information on each partner) for women born between the 1920s and the 1990s. Contextual information stem from the accompanying contextual database (CDB) from the GGP as well as from other databases.

In our study we are comparing women born between 1930 and 1980 in different European countries that have had at least one child. We examine, whether lower educated women differ in the union context in

which they have a first, and eventually a higher-order birth from their higher educated counterparts and whether these divergent patterns have changed over the last decades.

Our data are naturally hierarchically structured (individuals living in different countries), and we believe that the national gender context matters in shaping social diversity in non-marital childbearing. The presence of an explicit hierarchical structure of the data entails a violation of the independence assumption among observations within the same order-level units (Rabe-Heskett and Skrondal 2008), and represents a nuisance in the estimation of relationships at the individual level. By adding higher level-specific random intercepts to the predictor, multilevel models explicitly introduce the hierarchical structure in the analysis and allow us to produce reliable standard errors (Snijders and Bosker 1999). In order to account for the hierarchical structure of our data, we propose a two-level hierarchical model that considers individuals (first level units) as nested in countries (second level units).

The socioeconomic status of the woman (measured by internationally standardized measures of level of education and occupation) is our main explanatory variable at the individual level. Indicators of *women's autonomy*, *gender income differences*, and *defamilisation* are our main explanatory variables at the aggregate level. In order to elicit differences in our response variable according to various gender contexts and different social strata, we will estimate cross-level interactions between the country-level indicators and women's socioeconomic status. This allows us to verify whether aggregate-level gender circumstances act differently along different social groups in predicting the union type in which women have children. We will estimate multilevel multinomial regression models with random intercepts because our dependent variable takes three different states according to the union type in which women have had the child: singlehood, cohabitation, and marriage. We will stratify the analysis by parity, looking at the determinants of first and higher-order births separately.

Innovation

The proposed study is innovative in several ways. To this date, there is little research on the relationship between social status variation in non-marital childbearing and national gender contexts. Our study will increase our understanding of social status variation in the association between non-marital childbearing and gender contexts across time and space from a European perspective. The cross-country comparative perspective of this study is very strong both methodologically and analytically. We have rich survey data for a large number of countries with large variation in the level of gender equality. Using comparative macro indicators we are able to link different contextual dimensions of gender equality to social stratification in non-marital childbearing at the individual level and investigate how national gender context is related to non-marital childbearing for women of different socioeconomic status.

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