

Cohabitation, marriage and separation: contrasts in Europe

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Fewer and fewer Europeans are marrying and more and more are living together without being married. Europeans are also separating and divorcing more frequently, often to form a second or even a third union. Beyond these common trends, the situations in different countries are highly contrasting: non-marital cohabitation and union dissolution are widespread in the north, while marriage continues to predominate in southern Europe and in some eastern European countries.

Until the early 1970s in France, almost everyone waited until marriage to live with their partner. Marriage was for life, and divorce – hard to obtain and stigmatized – was only considered when conjugal life had become intolerable. Now marriage is frequently preceded by cohabitation, and more and more couples

are not marrying at all. Unions also tend to be shorter-lived, as separation and divorce become more common.

This new conjugal behaviour emerged in the late 1960s in Scandinavia, spearheaded by Sweden, and has gradually spread to the rest of Europe, but to varying degrees depending on the country.

Figure 1 – Percentage of women who have lived with a partner before age 25

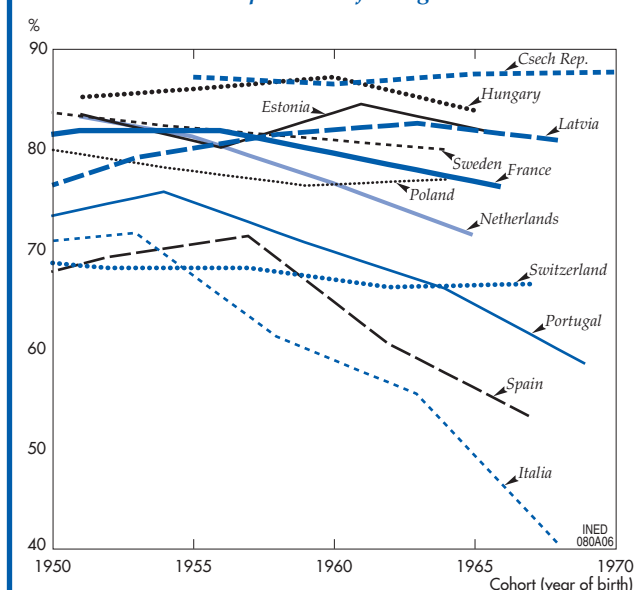
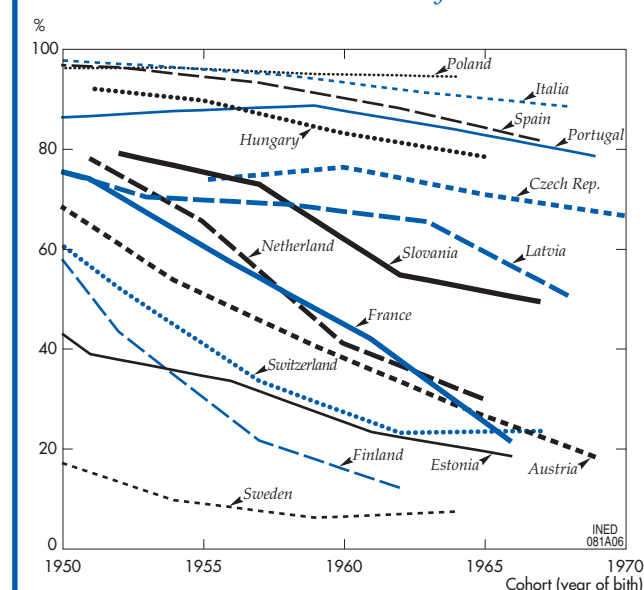


Figure 2 – Percentage of these women who married directly



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◆ Premarital cohabitation: more common in the north than in the south

In France, the age at which women first live with a partner (1) began to increase with the cohorts born in the late 1950s [1] (Box). European comparative surveys conducted in the 1990s [2] show that age at first union has also risen in many other countries, sometimes very sharply (Figure 1). That is the case in southern Europe, especially Italy, where now more than one women in two has never lived with a partner before age 25. In France, the increase in age at first union has been attributed to various factors: longer periods spent in education, higher unemployment among young adults, greater independence – especially among women – and a rigid rental housing market. The same factors probably explain the delay in entering union in Mediterranean countries. These countries are also distinguished by a growing proportion of young adults who still live with their parents. Only 60% of women born in the mid-1960s had moved out of their parents' home by age 25 in Spain and only 66% in Italy and Portugal, compared with 98% in Sweden and 85% to 95% in western Europe. In southern Europe, young people often continue living with their parents until they marry, whereas elsewhere moving away from home less often coincides with first union. In Switzerland, for example, 94% of women had moved out of their parents' home by age 25, but only 66% had already lived with a partner.

In the eastern European countries that joined the European Union in 2004, age at first union is still young (except in Poland) (Figure 1). However, the surveys referred to here were conducted too early to reflect the effects of the political and economic upheavals that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall. People now clearly enter union later, since nuptiality and fertility among young people have fallen sharply since the 1990s.

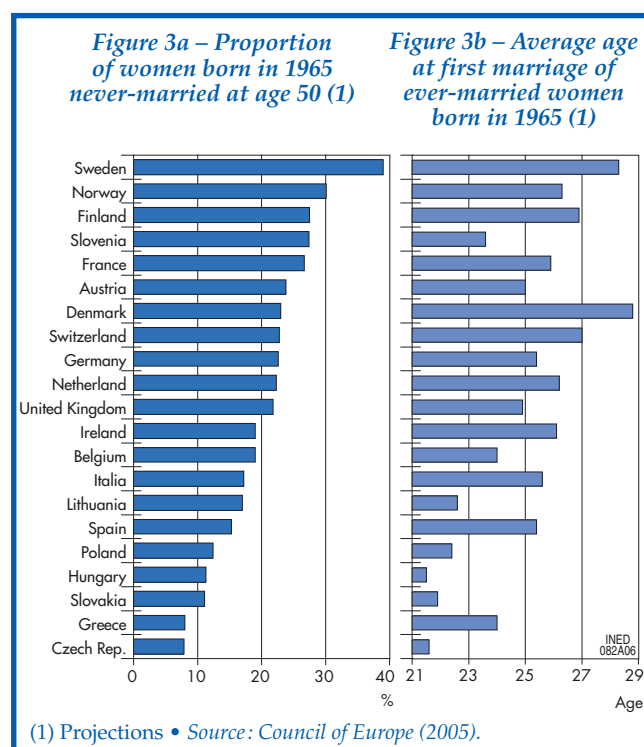
Across Europe, the first union is less and less often direct marriage, i.e. with no prior pre-marital cohabitation (Figure 2). In Sweden, direct marriages were already very rare among the cohorts born in the 1950s and today they represent barely more than 5% of first unions of women below age 25. In northern and central Europe, direct marriage, which was still the dominant model for the 1950s cohorts, has rapidly lost ground; only 20% to 30% of first unions before age 25 in the 1965 birth cohort were direct marriages. In Finland, the rate is even lower. Once again, the Mediterranean countries stand out, with an overwhelming majority of direct marriages and limited diffusion of non-marital cohabitation. Poland, a very Catholic country, also seems very attached to traditional marriage, whereas in other

eastern European countries direct marriage is already slightly less predominant among the 1960s cohorts. Estonia is an exception, with behaviour similar to Nordic countries, where direct marriage is now very much a minority practice.

◆ Cohabitation leads less often to marriage

In France, the 1999 Family History Survey (2) shows that cohabiting couples are less and less likely to marry. Among women whose first union took the form of informal cohabitation in the early 1980s, 36% officialized their union within two years, and 55% within five years. Among women who entered union a decade later, only 22% married within two years, and 43% within five years. The proportion of marriages is falling because couples prefer to remain unmarried for longer, but also because the proportion of union dissolutions has risen considerably (Table).

European surveys show that France is not the only country in this case [3]: the proportion of cohabiting couples who marry has dropped sharply in the Nordic countries, particularly Sweden, where fewer than 10% of couples marry within two years of union formation. By contrast, in Austria, Germany and Switzerland, the proportion of marriages within five years of union formation has remained stable. In Spain and Italy, it may even



(1) For want of statistical data, this article limits its observations to cohabiting couples, although there are smaller numbers of non-cohabiting couples (couples in "living apart together" relationships).

(2) The Family History Survey (*Étude de l'Histoire Familiale*) was conducted jointly by INSEE and INED in 1999 on a sample of 235,000 women aged 18 and over.

have increased, denoting those countries' continuing attachment to the institution of marriage. As is the case in France, the proportion of dissolutions among unions that began outside marriage has increased significantly in the Nordic and German-speaking countries.

◆ Fewer men and women are marrying

Later first unions, more frequent non-marital cohabitation, and fewer marriages following on from cohabitation are the three components of the nuptiality decline in Europe. However, large differences between countries are observed. The proportion of single women at age 50 varies greatly, because non-marital cohabitation has not spread simultaneously nor at the same pace from the north to the south of Europe or from the west to the east (Figure 3). In eastern Europe, with the exception of Slovenia, marriage was common and early until the late 1980s. Eastern European women born in 1965, most of whom were married by 1990, have not been affected by the subsequent decline in nuptiality: only one woman in ten is single. In southern Europe, the proportion of single women is also low (Greece) or moderate (Italy, Spain), although age at marriage is much higher. In the Nordic countries and France, marriage has lost much more ground to cohabitation. In Sweden, four 50-year-old women in ten have never married, in Norway three in ten, and almost the same proportion in Finland and France. These rates are very high compared with those of previous cohorts: among women born in 1945, the proportion of single women at age 50 is mostly below 10%, or just above (13% in Sweden).

◆ Unions are more short-lived

In France, unions are becoming more unstable. The proportion of break-ups within five years has increased significantly, both for couples who married directly and those who started living together without being married (Table). But for the latter, the probability of break-up is much higher. European surveys confirm that non-marital unions are more unstable everywhere. The risk of separation is generally much higher during the early years of these unions than in direct marriages [4]. However, marriage is not an absolute guarantee against break-up, and in most countries where cohabitation is now common, couples whose marriage was preceded by a period of cohabitation are more likely to separate than those who married directly [3].

In general, the diffusion of premarital cohabitation has not reduced the divorce rate – on the contrary. However, divorce was already very common in the 1980s in some Baltic countries (above 50% in Latvia and

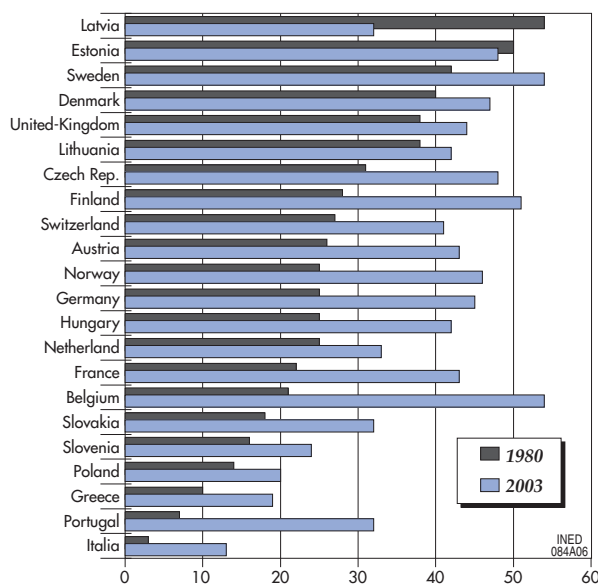
Estonia) and in Scandinavia (40% or more in Denmark and Sweden), followed closely by the United Kingdom and Lithuania (Figure 4) (3). At the other end of the spectrum were the southern European countries and Ireland, where divorce was still rare or illegal. The situation was similar in Poland. Between these two extremes lay the majority of central European countries plus Finland and Norway, where the total divorce rate ranged from 20% to 31% (except Slovenia and Slovakia). Over the next two decades, the divorce rate climbed everywhere except Latvia and Estonia. In 2003, the divorce rate exceeded 50% in Sweden, Belgium and Finland, and 40% in ten other countries. In southern Europe, the percentages are lower, but they

Table - Proportion of unions dissolved within five years by year of union formation and type of union, France

Type of union	Year of union formation (%)	
	1980-1984	1990-1994
Direct marriage	6	10
Cohabitation (1)	12	18
Total	10	17

(1) Whether or not cohabitation was followed by marriage.
Source: Family History Survey, 1999.

Figure 4 – Number of divorces per 100 marriages



Note: Spain and Ireland do not appear in the figure because divorce was still illegal there in 1980. In Spain in 2003, there were 22 divorces per 100 marriages.

Sources: Council of Europe (2005) and author's calculations based on national statistics.

(3) Annual indicators are not a direct indicator of the proportion of divorces. However, when the divorce rate is increasing steadily, the annual indicator is fairly close to the proportion of divorces among couples who married 12 to 15 years previously (average length of marriage at divorce). However, amendments to divorce legislation are sometimes followed by peaks in the annual indicator (notably when the previous legislation was too restrictive), and the figure considerably overestimates the divorce rate.

have nevertheless increased significantly, especially in Portugal (4). Only Italy seems to have resisted this general trend, but the high rate of court-ordered separations, whose effects are similar to divorce but which do not always lead to divorce, should probably be taken into account (5).

◆ Several unions in a lifetime: a general trend?

As separation and divorce become more common and occur earlier, more men and women are in a position to form another union (6). In France, for example, 26% of women born between 1960 and 1965 experienced a union dissolution before age 35, compared with only 12% of women born between 1945 and 1950 [5]. Since the probability of repartnering increases the younger the age at which separation occurs, the proportion of people forming several unions over their lifetime began to increase from the cohorts born in the 1950s onwards [6]. In this respect, the behaviour of men and women is different. More men than women who break up with their partner form new unions, because men's chances of forming another union are less dependent on their age at separation. Furthermore, having young children favours repartnering for men (especially among fathers with custody) but not for women [5, 6].

In countries where divorce has been common for a long time, more and more people form several unions. In the 35-39 age group, more than one woman in four in Sweden has already been in at least two cohabiting relationships. This is also the case for more than one woman in five in the United Kingdom, Latvia and Germany, and almost as many in Finland and Switzerland. In France, the proportion is slightly lower (13%), but Poland and southern European countries report the lowest proportions (3% to 7%) [3]. The surveys that provided these figures were conducted in the 1990s, so the proportion of women who have been in more than one union has undoubtedly increased since then. The same is true for the proportion of women who have been in at least three unions, which was still very low in the 1990s, at only 1 in 20 in Sweden, the United Kingdom and Germany.

So despite common trends, there is considerable variation in the type and length of unions in Europe. Between the Nordic model and the Mediterranean

(4) An amendment in 2001 triggered a substantial increase in the divorce rate: in 2002, the total divorce rate rose to 39%.

(5) Except in exceptional circumstances, couples cannot apply for a divorce under Italian law until they have been separated by court order for at least three years. More than 40% of court-ordered separations do not lead to divorce.

(6) Especially as some break-ups occur because one of the partners has already formed another union.

Box

Study population

Changing trends in unions are presented here mainly from the standpoint of women, for whom more data are available. However, many results are transposable to men, except for age at first union and age at first marriage, which are generally two or three years higher than for women.

This article deals only with heterosexual couples. Statistics on same-sex unions will be discussed in a forthcoming issue. This article also leaves out new official forms of recognition, such as France's *Pacte Civil de Solidarité* (PACS) and civil partnerships. These alternatives to marriage, which have appeared recently in some countries, are rarely available to heterosexual couples and so far account for only a small proportion of consensual unions. In France, fewer than 180,000 couples were in a current PACS partnership on 31 December 2005 (including same-sex couples), for an estimated total of 2.7 million non-marital unions in 2002.

model, a wide range of conjugal behaviour is observed. France is moving closer to the Nordic countries, although separation and repartnering are not yet as common. The German-speaking countries also seem to have adopted non-marital cohabitation, divorce and repartnering, but remain more attached to marriage, especially when there are children. Eastern Europe, where marriage was still early and systematic – although divorce was common – seems to be increasingly open to cohabitation, albeit to very different degrees depending on the country. Poland shows the greatest resistance to new conjugal behaviour, and in this way resembles the southern European countries. However, there is little doubt that changes are also under way there: divorce is spreading rapidly, offering the first sign of a challenge to marriage, or at least to its durability.

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