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Has childlessness peaked in Europe?

Version
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In Europe, women are having children at later ages and fertility is low. One might assume that childlessness rates have reached unprecedented levels, but in fact, women born in the first decade of the twentieth century remained childless more often than those born in the 1970s. Éva Beaujouan, Tomáš Sobotka, Zuzanna Brzozowska, and Kryštof Zeman study how childlessness evolved in twentieth-century Europe.

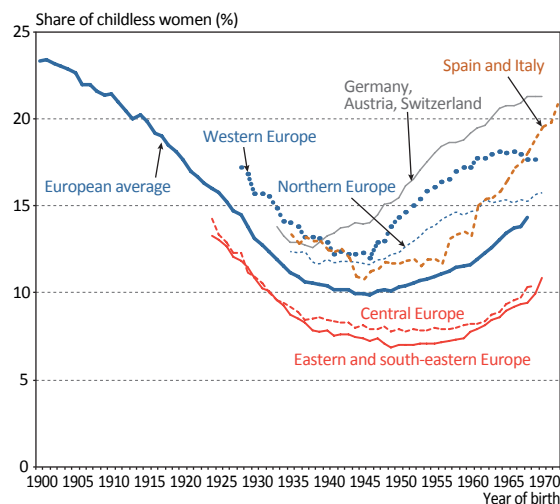
Fertility in Europe has reached low levels: women born in 1974 had 1.7 children on average. Moreover, the proportion of childless women is very high in some countries. Will this tendency persist, or will it be reversed in years to come? Examining childlessness rates in Europe among the cohorts of women born between 1900 and 1972 allows us to speculate on future trends.

A U-shaped trend in the twentieth century

Childlessness rates in twentieth-century Europe followed a U-shaped curve (Figure 1). Data from a range of sources are used here to track changes over time (Box). In all countries for which data are available, childlessness was very high among women born in the first decade of the twentieth century, at between 17% and 25%. It declined in the following cohorts, reaching its lowest levels (10%) among women born in the early 1940s. The trends in eastern and western Europe then diverged. In the east, childlessness stayed stable and low, averaging 7-8% until around the 1960 cohort and rising among the younger cohorts. In the west, an upturn in childlessness was observed from early 1940s cohorts, reaching an average of 15% in northern Europe and 18% in western Europe for women born in the late 1960s.

The U-shaped trend reflects how fertility behaviour responded to socioeconomic change in the twentieth century. For women born in the early twentieth

Figure 1. Average childlessness levels in Europe and in broader European regions



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Source: [3].

Note: The regional averages were calculated using information for all countries in the region for which data are available; see [3] for definition of regions and for data sources. Number of countries covered: 8 in 1900; 12 in 1910; 18 in 1920; 25 in 1930; 28-30 from 1938 to 1965; 24 in 1968; 10 in 1972.

Interpretation: Based on the available data for eight European countries, the average level of childlessness in Europe among women born in 1900 was 23%. Among women born in the late 1940s and early 1950s, childlessness in eastern and south-eastern Europe was just 7%, the lowest level on the continent.

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Data sources

Two databases were used for this study: the Human Fertility Database (HFD)^(a) and the Cohort Fertility and Education (CFE) database^(b). The data they contain are drawn from multiple sources, especially population censuses (different years, 1961-2011), long series of vital statistics data that can be used to reconstruct cohort fertility histories, data from population registers, and, in a few countries (especially France and Italy) large-scale survey data.

It is difficult to compare childlessness in different countries and study trends over time because the various sources often do not give the same figures. This is because the questions asked in censuses and surveys may vary, along with the methods used to combine data from civil records and population registers. Surveys may also be affected by different levels of sample selection bias, non-response and reporting errors, resulting in childlessness rates that are biased in different ways.^[2]

The share of childless women by level of education was available only from the CFE database. Three main groups were distinguished: "Low" corresponding to lower secondary education or less (ISCED-97 0-2), "medium" to higher secondary and post-secondary non-tertiary education (ISCED-97 3-4), and "high" to university education (ISCED-97 5-6). Due to lower data availability and higher uncertainty about childlessness among men, we focused on female childlessness only.

(a) HFD 2015. Human Fertility Database. Input data tables on women by age and parity (selected censuses and register-based data). www.humanfertility.org

(b) CFE 2015. Cohort Fertility and Education Database. Census data on cohort parity distribution for different countries. www.cfe-database.org

century, childlessness was closely linked to non-marriage. The First World War, which killed many young men of marriageable age, produced an imbalance on the marriage market, with large numbers of young women being unable to find a husband. In the poorer parts of southern, central and eastern Europe, many men emigrated to richer countries, thus increasing the numbers of unmarried women in the country of origin. The Great Depression that began in 1929 also affected union formation, and led to the first documented large-scale postponement of births among married couples.^[1]

The very low levels of childlessness among women born in the 1930s and 1940s were closely linked to the economic prosperity that followed World War II in the west. Full employment and the development of welfare state systems led to a boom in marriages and births. It became easier to set up a family, and people could afford to marry and have children at younger

ages than their parents or grandparents. In addition, foregoing parenthood in such favourable times was not socially accepted. The cohorts that produced the baby boom were generally the last to have above-replacement fertility rates (2.1 children per woman), a young age at family formation and low rates of non-marriage.^[3]

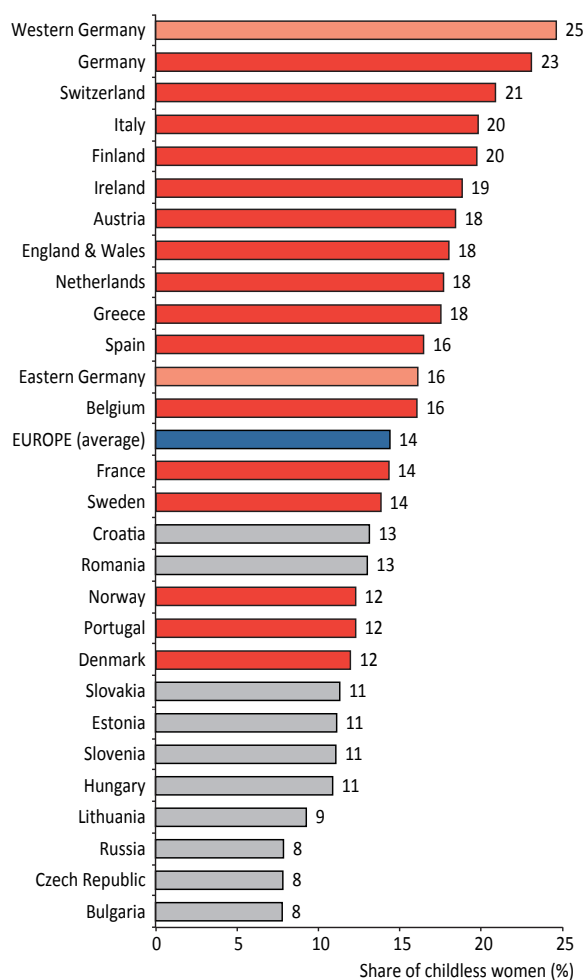
In the east, social pressure to marry early and have children at a young age lasted longer than in the west. It was reinforced by pro-natalist policies, so women born between the early 1940s and the early 1960s rarely remained childless. The low levels of childlessness were also linked to high rates of unplanned births among young adults; the effective contraception methods that were spreading fast in the west were difficult to obtain in these countries. The available data do not tell us clearly whether the east-west contrasts in childlessness preceded the post-war political division of Europe. Among women born at the beginning of the twentieth century, childlessness levels were lower in some eastern European countries than in the west, but elsewhere (e.g. Romania) they were just as high.^[3]

The cultural shifts that started in the 1940s birth cohorts in the west and in the 1960s in the east, including the rise of individualism, the desire for self-fulfilment and the more tolerant attitudes towards non-traditional living arrangements, led to new forms of childlessness. Most of the economic and cultural trends of the last half-century appear to have steered women and men away from having children. Reliable contraception, delayed union formation and childbearing, greater family fragility, demanding careers and job instability, as well as general economic uncertainty, are likely to foster childlessness.

Southern Europe, the new hotspot of childlessness?

In central and eastern Europe, the rise in childlessness among women born since 1960 reflects a shift towards lower and later fertility after the political regime change in 1989-1990 (Figure 1). The bumpy transition to capitalism, new labour market uncertainties, but also the expansion of higher education and new career opportunities put an end to the previous era of almost universal family formation. However, among the youngest cohorts analysed, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic and Russia are outliers. In these countries, only 8% of women born in 1968 remained permanently childless, far below the European-wide average of 14% (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Childlessness levels among women born in 1968 in the different European countries



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Source : [3].

Note: grey: central and eastern Europe; red: other European countries.

In the west, childlessness was most prevalent in the three predominantly German-speaking countries (Austria, Germany, part of Switzerland), where around one in five women born in 1968 remained childless (Figure 2). Traditionally in these countries, women stop working after a birth, at least temporarily. This may have led to a preference for childlessness among women who are strongly attached to the labour market, highly educated women especially. However, the long-term rise in childlessness appears to be ending among women born in the early 1970s, thanks to improved opportunities to combine career and motherhood. In Germany and Austria especially, the governments have recently made considerable efforts to expand childcare provision and improve parental leave conditions. Interestingly, the demographic legacy of the geopolitical division of Europe before 1990 still shows up in Germany:

childlessness among east German women born in 1968 is considerably lower (16%) than among their west German counterparts (25%).[3]

A rapid rise in childlessness is underway in southern Europe, with rates surpassing 20% among women born in the early 1970s in Greece, Italy and Spain. The factors behind this steep rise are the same as those driving the very low fertility in the region. Their effects have been reinforced by high unemployment, notably among young adults entering the labour market. In addition, inadequate family policies combined with persistent gender inequalities in the division of domestic work and childcare are making childbearing “costly” for the expanding group of well educated women.

Childlessness is higher among highly educated women

Typically, childlessness is lowest among women with little education and highest among those with a tertiary education. The change in childlessness over time and some of the contrasts between the European regions could be linked to the broad expansion of education over the twentieth century. The number of women who completed secondary education increased continuously and rapidly among the cohorts born in 1916-65. The proportion of low-educated women shrank steadily, while that of women with higher education increased slowly, mostly in the youngest cohorts. However, these changes had little impact on broad trends in childlessness.[4] To shed light on this lack of connection between changes in education and in childlessness, we can compare childlessness rates of low- and high-educated women with those of medium-educated women. Throughout the analysed cohorts, and in both eastern and western Europe, lower-educated women became mothers more often than better educated ones. However, the gap between the low- and the medium-educated women narrowed with time, so that in the youngest cohorts, childlessness levels in both groups converged in most countries. This explains why growing educational attainment did not push up the overall level of childlessness. By contrast, the differences between high- and medium-educated women did not decrease. They even grew in most eastern European countries, while remaining quite stable in the west after an initial slight increase. Nevertheless, women with university education were still a small group in these cohorts, so their behaviour had only a modest impact on overall levels of childlessness. The differences in childlessness

between women with medium and high education indicate that, for many years, the latter may have encountered specific challenges in reconciling their professional ambitions and their childbearing plans.

Future of childlessness

Today, the process leading either to childbearing or childlessness results from a complex combination of life choices and specific personal and economic circumstances, such as finding a suitable partner for starting a family. Childlessness typically results from a series of decisions over the life course, which involve perpetually postponing parenthood rather than rejecting it outright. While this choice has become broadly accepted in western, northern and southern European countries,[5] very few women actually plan to remain childless (3-5% in France and the United States). Alongside these voluntarily “childfree” women, another 2-4% of women will never be mothers due to sterility.

Two sets of factors are most prominent in explaining the recent rise in (involuntary) childlessness. First, precarious labour market conditions and limited public spending on families with children in many parts of Europe make the decision to become parents difficult for both men and women. Second, the rapid increase in full-time employment among women has not always been matched with childcare and leave policies allowing them to reconcile their career and family plans, or with a stronger investment on the part of their male partners and a better gender balance in the household. Not surprisingly, it is in southern European countries where difficult labour market conditions are compounded by relatively low domestic gender equality and limited options for women to reconcile work and family life, that childlessness has increased most rapidly in recent years.

While childlessness has broadly stabilized in western and northern Europe, it is likely to continue rising fast in southern Europe, where up to one quarter of the women born in the 1970s may remain childless. Childlessness will probably also continue rising in

central and eastern Europe, where a new pattern of delayed reproduction has been taking hold since the 1990s, following the turbulent collapse of the state-socialist political and economic system in the region. Highly educated women appear to be the vanguard of that change, and the region may experience further erosion of its distinct low-childlessness pattern. However, the rise in childlessness could be slowed down in many central and eastern European countries by the continuing negative perception of voluntary childlessness across the region.[5]

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Abstract

Almost a quarter of European women born in the first decade of the twentieth century had no children. Childlessness decreased in later cohorts, and among women born in the 1940s only one in ten, on average, remained childless. In the west, an upturn in childlessness was observed from the late 1940s cohorts, reaching an average of 15% in northern Europe and 18% in western Europe. In recent years, the increase has been most notable in southern Europe – where up to a quarter of the women born in the 1970s may remain childless – due to weak family policies combined with persistent gender inequalities that make it difficult for women to reconcile work and family life.