

# **Cascading Lives. Socio-Economic Status and the Gendered Pathways into Multipartnered Fertility in Four Nordic Countries**

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## **1. Introduction**

### 1.1. Family change and Multipartnered Fertility (MPF)

Family change is a leading force driving contemporary demographic shifts in Western societies. In particular, timing and context of childbearing have changed as well as the diversity and stability of unions in which “family happens”. A result of these transformations is that more individuals have children with multiple reproductive partners over their life, a phenomenon known as multipartnered fertility (MPF). At the same time, family change is socially stratified and socio-economic determinants lead to different family structures and dynamics across different social groups, affecting the realization of MPF over the life course as well.

MPF has become part and parcel of the demographic landscape in the western world. In Nordic countries, the focus of our study, up to one in five mothers and one in six fathers with at least two children have them with different reproductive partners (Jalovaara and Kreyenfeld 2020; Thomson, Dahlberg and Svallfors 2021).

### 1.2. A gap in the literature

Despite a growing body of research, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding how socio-economic differences affect the likelihood of experiencing MPF among individuals. One reason for this gap is that identifying a suitable comparison group for MPF parents requires a thorough understanding of selection processes across each of the stages that define a family life course that eventually lead to childbearing with multiple partners. However, research is often limited to the comparison of socio-economic status (SES) between single partnered fertility (SPF) and MPF parents. This broad comparison ignores that MPF is often the result of union dissolution followed by re-partnering. Therefore, comparing MPF men and women with

all multiparous parents neglects the diverse partnership and fertility histories of the latter. This offers only a partial understanding of the social gradient of fertility across partnerships. The result is that it is still unclear if MPF parents are different only from individuals who have children in stable unions, or also from men and women who make more family transitions towards multi-partnered fertility but do not experience it. This is for example the case of previously partnered parents who enter new unions but do not have additional children with their new partner.

Moreover, family change interacts strongly with persistent inequalities in the family formation process between men and women. Indeed, many stages of the family life course that can eventually lead to MPF can affect men and women differently. Because family change is a gendered process and MPF subsumes many of the transformations around the family, the unfolding of MPF likely reflects disparities in how life courses take shape between men and women. So far, research has shown childbearing across partnerships is more prevalent among women than among men (for example, see Guzzo 2014; Jalovaara and Kreyenfeld 2020; Thomson et al. 2021). However, there is still a lack of studies thoroughly addressing the gendered aspects of these complex family behaviors. Therefore, the question whether SES affects the likelihood of experiencing MPF differently for women and men, and if it does so across different stages of the life course, remains unanswered.

### 1.3. Research aim

Our study explores the selection process into MPF by linking empirical knowledge about the social gradient of MPF to the diversification of the family life course and to gender differences in family formation behaviors. Our goal is to fill some of the gaps in the literature by investigating SES differences in the likelihood of MPF between different individuals in different types of families. We focus on socio-economic differences because they influence both the likelihood of having children across partnerships and the potential outcomes of these fertility behaviors. Indeed, the differential availability of financial and social resources can affect how people respond to having children with new partners and the complex relationships within families and households it can generate. To understand the social stratification of MPF, we examine the role played by SES in each of the family transitions potentially leading to MPF. Additionally, we investigate gender differences in the association between SES, family transitions, and MPF. These differences may derive from persisting gender inequalities within couples, families, and the social institutions in which they are embedded. Increased birth spacing and gendered social norms about parenthood can expose women to longer period of time spent having to cater for dependent children (Andersson 2021). At the same time, the intersection of fertility, union dissolution, and persisting unbalanced child custody arrangements can induce substantial financial, social and emotional challenges for single mothers. Among many others, these disparities can interact closely with SES inequalities, and thus exacerbate the motherhood penalties usually associated with fertility in less complex family forms.

## 2. Background

The available literature on MPF offers mixed evidence regarding the socio-demographic characteristics of MPF men and women, with substantial differences between country contexts. In the United States, MPF is strongly associated with low socio-economic status (Carlson and Furstenberg Jr. 2006; Monte 2019), but the same association is not found for the (both geographically and socially) different contexts of Germany and Italy (Jalovaara and Kreyenfeld 2020; Pirani and Vignoli 2022). Contrasting evidence comes from the Nordic

Countries: in Finland, MPF is more prevalent among low SES individuals (Jalovaara and Kreyenfeld 2020), while in Norway the association between SES and MPF is markedly U-shaped among men. In Norway, both low and high educated fathers are more likely to have children with multiple partners compared with their medium educated peers (Lappegård and Rønsen 2013).

These contrasting findings suggest selection on SES likely operates at different stages of the life course for both low and high SES individuals. On the one hand, the association between socio-economic disadvantage and MPF can just be the product of low SES individuals having a higher risk of union dissolution, thus being exposed more to entering multiple reproductive partnerships. On the other, SES differences might still affect the likelihood of experiencing MPF after individuals exit previous partnerships. Higher SES can increase the chances of re-partnering and having additional children within successive unions because financially better-off individuals possess economic resources that can enhance their desirability on the partner market, reduce financial stress, and provide means to navigate the complexities of re-partnering. Additionally, high SES individuals might have stronger fertility preferences. The relative importance in different contexts of these mechanisms is likely the culprit for the observed cross-countries variations in the social gradient of MPF.

In addition, research on the social gradient of MPF lacks a gender perspective. For example, the work by Lappegård and Rønsen (2013) addresses the issue of selection, and the authors recognize SES operates differently for low and high SES individuals. However, they restrict their analyses to men. Although research on male fertility is warranted by a general lack of attention on fathers, the absence of a definite gender perspective neglects the fact that selection can operate differently for women and men also when they belong to the same social strata. For example, high SES women can be less likely to have (further) children within first and successive unions compared to low SES women because the opportunity costs of labor market interruptions are higher for them. In addition, mothers have an overall lower likelihood of re-partnering after a dissolution compared to men because they often continue living with their children after a break-up or separation. It is however still unclear by which degree SES mediates gender differences in partnering and fertility behavior and how this can affect the likelihood of experiencing MPF.

### **3. Context and data**

We focus on Nordic countries as they are often regarded as trendsetters of behavior associated with the *second demographic transition* (SDT). At the forefront of the so-called "gender revolution" (Goldscheider, Bernhardt and Lappegård 2015), these countries are characterized by high social acceptance of divorce (Rijken and Liefbroer 2012), and they represent a benchmark for the diffusion of new fertility behaviors such as MPF in Europe. In addition, the contrasting evidence on the social gradient of MPF suggests that, in this context, different mechanisms are at play in linking SES and the likelihood of childbearing across partnerships. However, they are yet to be uncovered.

We rely on rich, novel, and high-quality retrospective data from the Generation and Gender Survey II (GGS-II) for Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden (n=24,770). Collected between 2020 and 2022, this dataset allows us to study the association between SES and MPF among cohorts central to the recent fertility changes in Northern Europe. Previous GGS data have been used extensively to study partnership and childbearing behaviors, and fertility information available in the GGS-II is proven to suffer little from under- and mis-reporting (Leocádio et al. 2023). In addition, GGS-II data allow to link each respondent's children to either

the current or previous partners. With this information it is possible to accurately identify MPF cases (for a discussion on different MPF measures, see Guzzo and Dorius 2016).

#### 4. Our analytical approach

At the EPC 2024 Conference we will present results from a series of nested logistic regression models. The outcome of interest is having experienced MPF by age 40, coded as a binary variable with the values 0=No, 1=Yes. Our main predictor is SES, measured in years of education derived from the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED). To uncover the role of SES across different transitions in the family life course, we will estimate a series of nested logistic regression models, separated by gender of respondents. In the base model, we will include our dependent and independent variables and social background controls such as parental education and parental divorce. In each additional step, variables relating to past family events (binary, coded as: 0=The event did not happen; 1= The event happened) will be added. Sequentially, we add information on the occurrence of first parenthood, union dissolution, and re-partnering. The MPF literature suggests that also the partnership context at first birth matters for the likelihood of experiencing MPF. Indeed, a substantial share of individuals who later on experienced MPF became parents outside cohabiting or married unions (Guzzo 2014; Thomson et al. 2021). Hence, we will also show the results of include a variable attesting if respondents were co-residing with their partner at the time of first birth (0=No co-residing partner; 1=Cohabiting or married to partner).

Because we want to disentangle direct and indirect effects of SES on the likelihood of experiencing MPF, we will present the results of KHB decomposition analysis (Karlson, Holm and Breen 2012). Using this method, we will be able to accurately estimate the relative contribution of each predictor (the family events considered here) in explaining the association between SES and MPF. Furthermore, our analytical strategy allows to understand how each pathway of selection matters for the overall association between SES and MPF, and if SES can have a different role depending on the partnership and parental histories of men and women. Therefore, it is possible to assess if a clear comparison group for MPF parents exist in terms of SES, or if MPF parents are indeed different from all SPF parents. In addition, models stratified by gender will help uncovering the gender specificity of the socio-economic gradient of MPF. This will further our empirical knowledge about the intersection and reproduction of persistent social and gender inequalities in the most egalitarian countries in Europe.

Our findings will help researchers to better understand how selection into childbearing across partnership based on socio-economic factors takes place in Nordic countries. Based on our results, we will identify the group of parents who are closest to MPF men and women in terms of SES, thus helping the investigation the consequences of MPF independently from the social gradient of these new family forms.

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