

A Retreat from Parenthood within Partnerships: A Common Pattern in Northern Europe?

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Introduction

The postponement of first birth towards later ages is a well-known phenomenon in Western context, but whether and how this tendency interacts with developments in the domain of partnerships in various socio-economic and cultural contexts, is not clear.

Our recent register-based study (Rahn & Jalovaara 2023) suggests that the link between partnership formation and childbearing has been eroding in Finland. We saw that in Finland, among cohorts born in the 1990s, the probability of separation was already higher than the probability of first birth. This was in clear contrast with preceding cohorts born in the 1970s and 1980s. Other studies have found that postponing or foregoing fertility within unions is a primary reason for fertility decline from 2000 to 2018 in Finland (Hellstrand et al. 2022). Furthermore, the declining levels of period and cohort fertility in the region have lead researchers to contest the conceptualization of the Nordic model of high and stable fertility (Hellstrand et al. 2022). As recent fertility decline cannot be easily explained by socioeconomic changes (Comolli et al. 2021), there is a need for complementary explanations. In this study, we investigate whether the pattern observed in Finland, where young adults increasingly experience co-residential partnerships without becoming parents, is characteristic to countries with similar demographic profile. We develop an argument of unfolding cultural change.

The study contributes to previous knowledge as follows: (1) we study cohort trends in co-residential partnership formation (marital or non-marital), partnership stability and first birth in tandem; (2) we compare most recent birth cohorts to their predecessors across multiple countries in the same region; (3) we rely on survey data (GGS-I and GGS-II) that includes life histories, as well as information on attitudes and family values.

Theoretical background

Nordic countries are recognised as forerunners in the shift towards new reproductive regime, known as the *second demographic transition* (SDT) that predicted sustained sub-replacement fertility accompanied with increasing flexibility of partnerships and family forms, and a tendency to postpone family formation (Lesthaeghe 2020). Beside the broad framework of the SDT we derive theoretical insights from the *life course* approach which more specifically focusses on the timing, incidence, and sequencing of events related to family formation (Billari & Liefbroer 2010; Van Winkle 2017). Both frameworks conceptualise the change in family and fertility patterns over time.

Data and method

The data comes from the second round of GGS collected in 2020s and includes following countries: Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Estonia.

We apply event-history methodology and estimate piecewise constant regression models addressing: (1) the formation of first partnership (marital or non-marital) among women with no biological children and (2) events following partnership formation – birth of a first child or separation as competing pathways.

Preliminary findings

Preliminary insight (Figure 1) suggest that in all countries included to the study, first co-residential partnerships are formed at young adulthood and that most women form a partnership. No cohort trend towards postponement of partnership is observed. At the same time, there is a clear tendency to delay first birth across cohorts, which has not stopped even among most recent cohorts. These observations suggest that, indeed, the eroding link between partnership and parenthood might not be unique to Finland. In addition, preliminary findings for Estonia show similar dynamics within partnership that we observed in Finland – cohorts born since the 1980s tend to wait longer before proceeding to parenthood and increasingly experience dissolution instead.

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Figure 1. Cumulative incidences of first partnership formation (marital or non-marital cohabitation) and first birth, women born in the 1960s to 1990s.

