

Gender Equality and Fertility: Does Context Matter?

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FIRST PRELIMINARY DRAFT

(please do not cite)

Abstract

Demographic studies of the effect of gender equality on fertility render rather inconclusive and often contradictory results. Our paper starts with the proposition that this puzzling outcome may be brought about by several factors: First, gender equality comprises several dimensions and they are differently related to fertility. Second, the dimensions of gender equality play out differently at different parities. Third, gender equality and fertility are situated in place and time, and may thus be influenced by their context.

To substantiate our position we study the impact of “public” and “private” gender dimensions on women’s and men’s intention to have a first and a subsequent child in countries with different gender-equity status: France, Germany, Norway, Italy, The Netherlands, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, and Russia. To account for the contextual influence, we apply multilevel logistic regressions to data of the first wave of the Generations and Gender Survey. Our first results show that there are substantial gender differences regarding the impact of gender-equality dimensions on the intentions to have a first child and on the intention to have a second and/or subsequent child, and that context matters.

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Gender equality and fertility: research outline

Since the end of the twentieth century, demographic issues have come to the fore in the European Union. Documents issued by the European Commission address the issue of low and declining birth rates in European member states¹ and view it as a major challenge to Europe's future development. In line with most EU member states, the Commission stresses the need for policies to raise fertility and it regards policy interventions to increase birth rates as realistic (European Commission 2007). Since the authority to pass policies that affect childbearing behavior directly lies mainly with the member states, the EU links its suggestions to its employment and its gender mainstreaming agendas as specified in the Lisbon strategy, the Barcelona targets, and the gender equality roadmap (European Commission 2007). Their strategies focus on the reconciliation of work and family life, primarily in order to increase female labor-force participation rates in the EU to at least 60% by 2010 (European Council 2002, 12). To reach this goal they suggest an expansion of childcare provisions to offer childcare to at least 33% of children under age 3 and to 90% of children between age 3 and the mandatory school age by 2010 (European Council 2002, 12), an expansion of flexible working arrangements, and an increase in incentives to encourage men to take parental leave (Commission of the European Communities 2006b).

Placing fertility issues within the gender and employment objectives of the EU has major implications for fertility-related policy approaches and for fertility research. It calls for a broadening of the perspectives of the policy/fertility nexus to encompass gender equality and to examine the interlinkages between gender equality, employment, childcare provisions, and fertility. Employment and childcare provisions may be largely regarded as “public” aspects of gender equality, since both constitute elements of welfare-state policies and are regulated by the state.² There is also a “private” dimension of gender equality, which relates to the way in which a couple divides paid and unpaid work and the time devoted to child raising among them. Welfare-state research assumes that the latter is influenced by policies (e.g.: parental leave, provision of childcare, tax regulations and the like). Economic and cultural studies furthermore suggest that economic factors and normative (cultural) aspects gender the private arrangements of work and childcare, as well.

¹ For cases in point, see the Green Paper on demographic change and the new solidarity between the generations (Commission of the European Communities 2005), the Commission's communication on the demographic future of Europe (Commission of the European Communities 2006a) and the Commission's first report on Europe's demographic future (European Commission 2007).

² Note that “regulation” may also include the state's inactivity as regards the labor market and childcare provision. Moreover, for simplicity, we use the term “state” for any political entity within a nation state (e.g. also regions and municipalities, which are often in charge of childcare provisions, legally and/or administratively).

We take these considerations as a starting point to explore which role “public” and “private” aspects of gender equality play in childbearing intentions of women and men in selected Western and Eastern European countries, and we furthermore study which role contextual factors play in shaping them. We make use of the first wave of the national Generations and Gender Survey of Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Russia, Georgia, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Norway. These data permit us to study women’s and men’s intention to have a first or subsequent child in the near future in a set of countries which may be considered as representing different types of welfare states, different paths to gender equality, and different economic and cultural situations. In addition, our contextual variables include regional indicators, which capture institutional, economic, and cultural aspects relevant for gender equality and fertility. We are therefore able to study the relevance of the intersectionality of gender-equality aspects and institutional, cultural, and economic aspects for fertility, using multilevel logistic regressions. We furthermore investigate the impact of these factors separately for childless women, childless men, mothers and fathers, since various gender issues may affect intentions differently for women and men and for childless people and parents.

Our abstract proceeds as follows: We first give a brief overview over recent studies of the relationship between gender equality and fertility (not provided fully in this draft). This is followed by an outline of the gender-relevant meaning of these features and of their representation in the fertility-related policy orientation of the countries of our interest. We then present some first and preliminary results of our analysis and conclude with a brief outlook on the complete paper.

Gender equality and fertility – some research results³

A number of studies related to Western European countries point to the importance of gender equality for fertility development. Policies that promote women’s labor-force participation, that alleviate women’s care obligations, that further fathers’ uptake of parental leave, and that reduce the motherhood penalty in employment are regarded as conducive to increased childbearing and improved fertility development. McDonald (2000a and 2000b) argues that cleavages in gender equity between individual-oriented social institutions (such as education or employment) and family-oriented social institutions (such as familial childcare) lead to lower fertility: If women’s educational attainment and labor-force participation increase to levels higher than or close to those of men, while familial care primarily remains a woman’s tasks, fertility will drop to very low levels (*ibid*). These theoretical assumptions are partly confirmed by empirical macro-level studies which show that the negative association between female labor-force participation and fertility has weakened over time or even changed to a positive one (Brewster and Rindfuss 2000; Ahn and Mira 2002; Engelhardt, Kögel, and Prskawetz 2004; Castles 2003). These changes are largely attributed to institutional changes, in particular to the increase in institutional childcare facilities for children under the age of three (Castles 2003) and to a concurrent de-familialization of care and welfare services (Esping-Andersen 1999), that is, to a shift from the family to the state as the main

³ For this and the subsequent section, see Neyer and Rieck (2008)

provider of care and private welfare. However, there are great differences in institutional care services for children across Europe (Neyer 2003 and 2005). As a consequence, the observed change in the macro-level relationship between employment and fertility is mainly driven by changes in the Nordic countries and in France. These countries have geared their social policies towards extending childcare, promoting women's employment, and, particularly in the Nordic countries, towards furthering gender equality (Neyer 2005; Neyer 2003). Studies of the relationship between employment and childbearing in these countries regularly find a positive impact of women's employment on childbearing (in that employed women have higher fertility), while the effects of employment on childbearing are mostly negative in countries that adhere to motherism, that is, whose policies endorse women as sole carers (Andersson 2000; Kravdal 1994; González 2000; Vikat 2004).

On the level of the family, greater equality in the gender division of care seems to be conducive to childbearing as well. Several studies on the Nordic countries show that fathers' engagement in childrearing increases further childbearing; couples in which the father takes some parental leave are more inclined to have another child than couples in which the father has not taken out any parental leave (Oláh 2003; Duvander and Andersson 2006; Duvander, Lappegård, and Andersson 2008, Esping-Anderssen, Güell, and Brodmann 2007; Brodmann, Esping-Andersen, and Güell 2007). However, as Lappegård points out, the share of father's uptake of parental leave depends on the "gender balance in breadwinning". The more equal the mother's and father's income are and the larger the mother's contribution to the household income is, the more parental leave the father takes (Lappegård 2008). Just as with the changing relationship between employment and fertility, the positive impact of a father's parental leave and of his engagement in childcare on fertility is found mostly in the Nordic countries, which have actively promoted a gender-equal distribution of work and care between the partners and which have encouraged men's contribution to (unpaid) family work since the 1970s/1980s. In countries which do not challenge the prevalence of the male-breadwinner/female-carer family organization, the findings are more ambivalent, ranging from no effects or even negative effects of gender equality to some positive effect among specific socio-economic groups (Esping-Andersen, Güell, and Brodmann 2007; Mills et al 2008). In the latter countries, having a child increases the gender inequality in the distribution of time and of financial resources. After the birth of a child, fathers tend to work more than before while mothers tend to work less or to withdraw from the labor market (Misra, Budig, and Moller 2007a).

In countries which in effect support a gendered division of care and employment, women also face a greater motherhood penalty, which means that there is a greater decrease in income or in personal financial resources due to motherhood than in countries which put more store on gender equality. In fact mothers incur the largest wage penalties (Misra et al. 2007a); Misra, Budig, and Böckmann 2008) in the conservative welfare states of Europe, which put the emphasis on women as primary caregivers (Austria, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands). In the Nordic countries, in France, and in the Eastern European countries, the motherhood penalty is considerably lower. In these countries, mothers actually do not earn much less than women without children do (ibid).

Single-country studies indicate that policies that help women sustain their income level during employment interruption after childbirth, may facilitate the decision for

motherhood, while (severe) reductions of their financial resources due to childbirth may constrain childbearing. An analysis of developments in Hungary (Aassve 2006) showed that there was a considerable decline in first-birth intensities among highly educated women when an income-related childcare benefit of 75 percent of a mother's previous income during her care leave⁴ was changed to a means-tested flat rate allowance amounting to only about half of the previous childcare benefit. Similarly, in his study of women's labor-force attachment and childbearing in Finland, (Vikat 2004) demonstrated that despite a severe economic crisis and high unemployment in Finland during the 1990s fertility levels did not drop. He attributed this to a home-care benefit⁵ which allowed mothers to maintain their income levels during the first years after childbirth.

Such studies allow us to draw a fairly consistent picture of the relationship between gender equality and fertility: On the macro-level, a de-gendering of labor-force participation and a de-familialization of childcare work seem to be necessary to create conditions supportive of childbearing and highest-low fertility. On the micro-level, the link between employment and childbearing appears to be largely intermediated by the institutional support offered to women. De-feminization of private care, which means a more equal distribution of care between mothers and fathers, has proved to be conducive to childbearing in countries which strive towards a gender-equal society. The fertility impacts of a more equal division of care between parents are more ambiguous in countries that support female-carer/male-breadwinner family forms or in countries which regard the distribution of care as a matter of parental choice. Finally, a lower birth penalty and the prospect of maintaining one's own financial resources after childbirth seem to further childbearing while severe income cutbacks tend to reduce childbearing.

Employment, care, and financial resources from a gender and welfare-state perspective

As our review of previous research indicates, fertility development in Europe seems to be increasingly tied to the gender development in employment, care support, and financial resources in society and/or within the family. Employment, financial resources, and care also represent different dimensions of gender equality and of welfare-state policies which regulate gender relationships in society and in the family. In all European societies, employment provides the main source of economic independence; it ensures one's own and one's family's living and grants comprehensive welfare protection over the life course. In most countries, this can only be achieved through full-time employment or through employment which secures an income on the level of full-time employment. Having a full-time employment may thus be regarded as a proxy for a person's capacity

⁴ The care leave could be taken after maternity leave, that is it could start six months after the child's birth and last until its second birthday (Aassve, Billari, and Spéder 2006, 135). Care leave (and also parental leave) was mostly taken by mothers (ibid).

⁵ The Finnish home-care allowance is a benefit granted to parents who do not make use of public childcare. In the 1990s the home-care allowance was paid on top of other benefits, such as possible unemployment benefits (Vikat 2004). While it sustained fertility levels during the crisis, it led to a considerable decline in female labor-force participation (Rønsen and Sundström 2002).

to “*form and maintain an autonomous household*” (Orloff 1993, 319), to assure her independent social protection, and to maintain her bargaining power in a partnership. By contrast, working part-time usually implies less income, lower social-security benefits, a reduced capacity to sustain a household, and in couples with an unequal amount of paid work, a reduced bargaining power. For childless women and for men in general, working part-time may also be a sign of tenuous labor-market integration and accompanied by greater risks of unemployment.

The financial resources available to a person are usually seen as an indicator of her/his material standard of living. From a gender perspective, however, we can also consider them as an indicator of a person’s *agency*, that is, of the scope of alternatives available to her, of her capabilities to choose, and of her potential to achieve well-being (Korpi 2000, 132; Sen 1992; Lister 1997). Financial resources are thus not simply a sign of possessions or of wealth, but are also an indicator of the power to act, of the capacity to participate in the active life of society, and of the potential to decide one’s own life course.

Since in most countries, it is women who attend to small children, care offers (such as institutional childcare provisions and parental leave) can be viewed as a public *recognition* of women’s work and as the state’s effort to alleviate women’s care burden. Public childcare services may also be regarded as a *substitute* for the male carer, enabling both, women and men, to devote equal time to employment. However, while institutional childcare provisions promote gender equality by enabling mothers’ employment, parental-leave options may undermine gender equality if the regulations allow long leaves, grant only low (or no) benefits, and are not also specifically designed to induce men/fathers to take parental leave. One can therefore regard a country’s care options as a sign of the extent to which it attempts to further gender equality or to reinforce gender inequality at the public and at the private level.

European welfare states have pursued different gender strategies regarding the support which they grant women or men to maintain their own employment, sustain their independent financial resources, and alleviate their care obligations or enable their care giving during parenthood (Meyers, Gornick, and Ross 1999; Leitner 2003). The countries which we look at in our study represent different approaches in this respect (the final paper will include a description of the main lines of gender and welfare policies in the countries we study, highlighting similarities and differences among them relevant for the interpretation of our findings).

Gender equality and fertility intentions - findings from the Generations and Gender Survey

For our analysis we make use of the harmonized datasets of the first wave of the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS1) in France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Bulgaria, Hungary, Romania, Russia, and Georgia (and partly use of the second wave from Hungary) All Generations and Gender Surveys are expected to use a standardized questionnaire which guarantees comparability across countries (see Vikat et

al 2007 and UNECE/PAU 2008a and UNECE/PAU 2008b).⁶ However, Hungary started its survey prior to the first wave of the Generations and Gender Surveys; Italy and the Netherlands included modules of the Generations and Gender Survey in other national surveys. Therefore, some questions which we use are missing in the data of these countries, but our preliminary results show that this does not affect the results of our findings significantly.

We concentrate on the respondents' intention to have a child within the next three years (as of the interview date). By limiting the questions on the respondent's fertility intention to a foreseeable time period and by embedding it into questions about the current personal and familial circumstances of the respondent, the GGS1 overcomes some of the problems associated with the surveying of intentions. Answers to questions about an individual's fertility intention in general, such as "how many children do you intend to have (i.e., ever)", are likely to capture a social norm as well, that is the number of children the individual thinks she/he should have rather than will have. Such general questions therefore render findings which confound intentions and social norms, and this may be (partially) avoided by the more concrete question used in the GGS. Moreover, questions on intentions which are not contextualized tend to relate to a rather abstract ideal universe and do not elicit the conditions which either constrain or support the realization of the reported intention. Questions on intentions which cover an overseeable time period and which therefore are "in close temporal proximity to the prospective behavior" ((Misra, Budig, and Moller 2007b), 49) are generally considered to be the better predictors of actual behavior. The same applies if determinants and perceived consequences of the intended behavior are taken into consideration (Ajzen 1991). They offer the possibility to assess which personal or contextual circumstances are crucial in the decision to carry out the intended action.

As we have mentioned, in our study, we analyze the intention to have a child within the next three years separately for childless women and men and for mothers and fathers. We have chosen to look at the intention to have a first child because the birth of the first child is one of the most crucial events relevant to gender equality. Women's childbearing (and her reproductive potential) has always been an anchor point for engendering and maintaining gender inequality (Pateman 1989; Wikander, Kessler-Harris, and Lewis 1995). Often, the birth of the first child, more so than the birth of subsequent children, constitutes a turning point in the gender division and gender distribution of employment, care, and financial resources; it may induce a change in the behavior towards a more gendered pattern (e.g., reduction in employment by women vs. increase in employment hours by men) and thus increase the gender inequality within the couple and within society. This may be acceptable to some couples, but may put a strain on others (e.g.: increase the dissatisfaction with the division of household work). These changes may in turn affect the subsequent intentions to have another child. We may therefore expect that women and men assess such features differently when they consider having a child, and that there are also differences between childless women and mothers resp. childless men and fathers. In other words, we may expect inter-gender and intra-

⁶ A detailed documentation of the Generations and Gender Program, its guidelines, concepts, its survey instruments, and of GGP-related conferences can be found on the homepage of UNECE/PAU at: <http://www.unece.org/pau/ggp/Welcome.html>

gender differences as to the relationship between gender equality and childbearing intentions. We therefore carry out our analyses separately for women and men, mothers and fathers, for each country separately (and for all countries pooled with country dummies). Covariates include respondent's age (limited for women to age 40 and for men to age 45), education, family status, living arrangement, and for the multilevel analysis regional indicators capturing employment, childcare provision, and cultural aspects.

Preliminary results⁷

As expected, childless women and men in full-time employment are more inclined to consider having a child within the next three years than childless women and men who work part-time or who are not employed, the only exception being women and men in Norway. The picture changes completely when women and men are parents: Gender differences become striking as do differences among women in different welfare states. In general, (full-time and part-time) employed mothers seem to be less inclined to consider another child (within the next three years) than non-employed mothers, with particularly low intentions to have a child among full-time working mothers in Germany and Italy. We do not find such a decline in intentions when men turn into fathers. These results are quite striking, because they suggest that despite many (political) attempts to lower the costs of motherhood for women, the first child still seems to be crucial for women with regard to equality in the “public” sphere, and this seems to impact on subsequent childbearing intentions. (Our preliminary results suggest similar conclusions as to the effect of a first child on the private relationship and its impact on subsequent childbearing.) More generally speaking, it seems that having a first child increases the gender inequality between women and men by affecting mainly women and reversing the effect gender equality on childbearing intentions among women.

As to the financial resources we find that limited means reduce childless women's and men's intention to have a first child. However, we find a greater variation across countries in the impact of limited means on mothers' and fathers' intention to have another child: In countries which support families with children limited means do not seem to negatively affect the intention to have another child within the next three years, while there seems to be such an effect in countries which offer no or limited support to mothers and fathers.

Our analyses of the impact of institutional childcare support on mothers' and father's inclination to have another child does not provide a straight-forward result. The provision of childcare in the respective countries for children below age three and for children above age three seem to play a role. The data suggest that the importance that mothers (and fathers) attribute to the availability of public childcare and the employment status (of the mother) may be important factors in childbearing decisions, but more detailed (multilevel) analysis is necessary to get a clearer picture of the relationship between (the use of) institutional childcare and childbearing intentions.

⁷ We only give a general overview over the analyses with all countries.

Conclusion: Gender equality and fertility – does context matter?

The above sketched preliminary results suggest that gender equality measured along the dimensions employment, financial situation, care affect women's and men's childbearing. The results also suggest that gender equality plays out quite differently for childless and for parents. As the different results for different welfare states indicate context seems to matter greatly and furthermore, context must be seen as the intersection of various factors (institutional, economic, cultural). This aspect is further pursued in the next step of our analysis and will be presented in the full paper at the EPC conference.